

Sasna

Religious Behaviour Among the Praych Doung Villagers in Central Cambodia

Antti Juhani Louhenkilpi

The University of Helsinki

Faculty of Social Sciences

Social and Cultural Anthropology

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of the Research Question

In this thesis, I analyse religious behaviour and religious rituals of the Praych DOUNG villagers. For this purpose, I conducted a fieldwork during 2011-2012 in Praych DOUNG village, Kandal province, Central Cambodia. I have been to Cambodia several other times as well, and I draw from my experience in and of Cambodia as a whole in this thesis. The people I met and encountered in the Praych DOUNG village were ethnic Khmers, both men and women, with rather poor and uneducated backgrounds aged approximately from 25 to 45 years.

My aim is to understand the religious behaviour of these Praych DOUNG villagers, to illustrate what their religious behaviour is in practice, and to answer the question of why they do need/have religion, religious behaviour, and religious ritual, to name a few. I also examine the nature of belief for the Praych DOUNG villagers, as I seek to understand how and in what ways they believe in spirits and in other religious or supernatural forces and entities. Can the Praych DOUNG villagers' belief in spirits be compared to belief in god in Western societies? This is a relevant question as the Western belief in god is arguably influenced by science and the ontological tradition of the Western philosophy.

I maintain a somewhat general aim in this thesis to study the religious behaviour of the Praych DOUNG villagers – or, more specifically, the majority of the Praych DOUNG villagers as described above. The reason I do so is that Praych DOUNG village is a small and rather homogeneous village in Central Cambodia, and my arguments in this thesis are based on prevalence. My aim is not to discuss any single idea or opinion of a single individual if it is not peculiar to many other Praych DOUNG villagers as well. The belief in spirits and the authority of spiritual leaders in Praych DOUNG village was widely acknowledged by almost everyone I talked to, and it was those religious phenomena that was the foundation of religious behaviour, or *sasna*, in the whole village.

I intend to accomplish this through dialectical comparisons with classic anthropological studies about religion and religious activity and my fieldwork findings. For instance, I draw from Maurice Bloch in a comparison of two different systems of conceptualisation within the Praych DOUNG village regarding religion and religious views. By a system of conceptualisation I mean a system of understanding, structuring, classifying, and defining the world, one's both social and natural environment, and one's life in it – its meanings, its causality,

and its ethos. By two different systems of conceptualisation I mean what anthropologist Maurice Bloch talked about in an article called “The Past and the Present in the Present” (1977). In his article, Bloch argues that there are several different contexts within people’s lives, such as ritual context, political context, agricultural context, and economic context, within which people have and experience different systems of conceptualisation. For instance, Bloch (ibid.) argues that Clifford Geertz was mistaken in arguing that the Balinese have a non-durational notion of time, because they might have it within a ritual context, but in other contexts, contexts that have more to do with people’s practical activities, they do not have it. In more general terms, according to Bloch, it is incorrect to place a certain cultural trait to any given cultural group based on that cultural trait manifesting itself only in ritual, forgetting that in other contexts people hold totally different kinds of conceptualisation.

I will discuss religious morality in specific as I do believe it has some plausibility and relevance regarding other interesting research areas, such as economic anthropology and anthropology of global aid. On a more general note, this thesis takes part in the scientific discussion on religion and its existence. However, I would not like to engage in a debate on the definition of the English word religion, mostly because I realize the problematic nature of translating other cultures and their concepts into Western categories, even with comparative purposes. For instance, treating the English word *religion* and the Khmer word *sasna* as each other’s synonyms is not merely incorrect but also misleading. This is why my emphasis in this thesis is on religious behaviour that I found in Praych Doung village, and not either religion or *sasna*. The word *sasna* is more associated with already established dogmatic world religions, such as Christianity (*sasna preah yesu*) or Buddhism (*sasna preah pout*) which are not indigenous to Cambodia, and the religious behaviour, rituals, and other animistic Khmer religious phenomena are merely called *tumneam tumloab khmer* or *pra-payney khmer*, meaning Cambodian customs and Cambodian traditions respectively. However, in this thesis, by the word *sasna* I refer to the religion in general in the Praych Doung village due to the Praych Doung villagers themselves used the word in a similar manner.

Religion, as an anthropological object of study, is not at all a clear-cut definition of all of the variety of activities, beliefs, tendencies, emotions, duties, experiences, and habits that are manifested in different shapes and forms amongst religious communities throughout the world.

Nonetheless, this study is a comparative attempt to reveal something about religion in general through the particular case of the Praych Doung village.

Religion is, as an English and thus a Western word, a very universalist and essentialist concept (very much like words such as development, morality, rationality, or art as opposed to words such as door, car, phone, or computer) and it is in this respect that Talal Asad hits the bull's eye when he claims that universalist definitions of religion are not truism but creations of those in power (Asad 1993). Thus we should find a way to seek both the metaphysical aspects of religion and the culture specific or psychological aspects of religion. But, in this study I do not wish to analyse religion as a word or as a universal concept, because it would be pointless to do so.

Instead, I seek the function of religion, or at least *sasna*, which is to be a medium for controlling one's feelings and one's life. Thus I believe with the psychological functionalists that a Cambodian man who seeks consultation of a fortune teller prior establishing his pig farming business is doing essentially the same thing than a Westerner who seeks the help of an established economic consultant prior opening a grocery store: to reduce anxiety, raise hope, and to be causally in control of one's success. Uncertainty and insecurity, two things that have to be overcome in any people's life, in both rich and poor countries, are often solved through religious ideas.

The sociological and structural aspects of religion merely follow from the aforementioned analysis. Religion is universal and essential to society because it is like science or economics for most of the Western world (pardon such brutal distinction between West and the rest). It serves as a source for causal explanation and seemingly (or genuinely, although this view demands a discussion of what is genuine and what is not) gives man control over the material world. It may also be, like language, politics, economics, art, and the like, a source of social viability for a variety of human groups or communities through feelings of togetherness and socially transmitted ideas of why religion is good or why religion is bad (the moral perspective).

In Praych Doung village, I was able to see the relevance of the several religious traditions outside the formal sphere of Buddhism. They practiced a kind of arbitrary mix of religious influences instead of a dogmatic approach of choosing one clearly-defined religious tradition and avoiding others¹. Indeed, the situation in Praych Doung clearly resembled Claude Levi-Strauss' discussion of the "savage mind" (Lévi-Strauss 1966) and the ways in which the

¹ There is the Islamic *cham* minority in Cambodia, which all of the Khmers are avoiding because it is considered to be a distinctive and somewhat strange collectivity in Cambodia. However, in Praych Doung village there were no *cham*-muslims so what I state here is plausible.

Bricoleur uses anything at hand to complete his project. Lévi-Strauss made the comparison between the savage mind, the mythical thought, and the scientific mind, or scientific thought, through arguing that the former uses whatever in hand to do whatever needs to be done whereas the latter knows exactly what to use and whose tools are predeterminedly crafted to meet any specific need. The fundamental difference here lies then in the way in which the former never knows how to relate means and ends whereas the latter, through science, knows exactly how to relate means and ends.

I will conclude that I do not treat religion as a belief system per se, because there are a lot more to religion than merely belief. There are also social, habitual, moral, and emotional or psychological, and political aspects of religion, and this study will focus on the psychological and moral aspects of religion. I take it for granted that the function of religion and the meaning of religion are deeply related. Functions always stem from meanings and vice versa.

Further in Chapter 1, I will discuss my fieldwork methodology, the recent history of Cambodia, religion in general in Cambodia, and the Praych DOUNG village. In Chapter 2, I will discuss the individual aspects of religion in the Praych DOUNG village with emphasis on Clifford Geertz's idea of religion as a model for reality, because in this thesis I focus on practical aspects of religion and on how Praych DOUNG villagers use religion as opposed to how they perceive it in a metaphysical register of ethos and worldview, which belong more to Geertz's notion of religion as a model of reality. This is because the Praych DOUNG villagers were themselves more invested in the practical matters of religion, as in what they did for themselves or for their families in the religious context, as opposed to metaphysical aspects of religion.

In Chapter 2, I also pay attention to psychological functionalism of religion along the lines of both Bronislaw Malinowski (1925) and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1979), who talked about religion providing for psychological needs and religion serving as an explanatory framework for workings of nature respectively. I will relate to these theories in Chapter 2 in analysing the Praych DOUNG villagers through a notion of "causal explanation" of religion.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the social functions of religion in the Praych DOUNG village, mostly focusing on moral matters, as I argue it is a shared morality and shared comprehension of religion that sustains the Praych DOUNG villagers' social life and that creates social viability. I focus on this through Joel Kupperman's analytical division of religious ethics into religious morals and religious supramorals. According to Kupperman, religious morals are moral codes and norms that incite feelings of guilt when transgressed (examples being not to kill or not to

to steal), while the religious supramorals incite feelings of regret or inadequacy (examples being not to neglect the elderly or not to withdraw from joining shared rituals). If religion sustains any kind of social viability, it is sustained within the realm of religious supramorals and not within the realm of religious morals, because it is within the realm of religious supramorals that the Praych Doung community is more fragile and suspect to change. It is not expected that the Praych Doung villagers would suddenly start killing each other (which would obviously alter the social equilibrium), but it is highly possible that the young start neglecting the elderly (because of a difference in their religious preoccupations) or the economically successful get less interested in the economically unsuccessful when it comes to shared rituals.

I analyze the individual aspects first and the social aspects after in a bid to point out that, at least in Praych Doung village for the villagers I interviewed and encountered, religious life fundamentally reflects individual matters, problems, and life crises, and that the social functions of religion are an extension of these individual matters as they relate to other people's individual matters in the moral context. Social cohesion is most fundamentally a balance of individuals' relations and a shared understanding of each others' – both religious and unreligious – actions.

In Chapter 4, the last chapter, I will analyze Maurice Bloch's ideas on different contexts within people's lives in which they act and orient themselves in different ways according to different meanings and conceptions that are embedded in the different contexts. I do this in the last chapter because, in my opinion, it serves as a decent background for everything discussed in earlier chapters. Are the ideas and arguments made in earlier chapters merely plausible in the religious context but not in the practical every day context? If it was so, it would surely change the meaning of the whole thesis, as it would render *sasna* less significant for the Praych Doung villagers. Is *sasna* merely a habitual ritual which is forgotten when the morning comes, the roosters crow, and one heads to the rice fields? Or is *sasna* somehow brought to the rice fields as well, making it an all-encompassing set of ideas for the Praych Doung villagers, affecting every aspect of Praych Doung humanity?

Bloch namely discusses two important contexts, the religious context and the practical every day context, arguing that people might perceive the world in different ways within the different contexts. He further argues that an anthropologist would be mistaken to argue that a certain perspective in any given cultural group that the anthropologist observes is the culturally-specific perspective of that given group, because that perspective might merely belong to one context but not to another. For instance, it could be true that the Praych Doung villagers believe in spirits in the religious context but at the same time know that there are no spirits within the practical everyday context. If it were so it would be reductionism to state that the Praych Doung villagers

believe in spirits. In Chapter 4, I will argue that the Praych Doung villagers do not have such abstract and analytical divisions of reality or perception into different conceptual contexts, and that *sasna* thus permeates the whole of the Praych Doung ethos.

1.2 Fieldwork Methodology

While I was in the field I tried very hard to embrace the phenomenological method of the anthropological study of religion – trying to remain neutral about the verity and plausibility of the religious rituals and aspects I encountered and committing no judging. The truth or falsity of a religious act, ritual, or belief is totally irrelevant when it comes to social sciences and anthropological inquiry into religion. This is because religion (at least in Cambodia, although it would be pretty safe to say the same throughout the world) is not of metaphysical interest as most of religious aspects of human life relate to personal, this-worldly, problems. A Cambodian woman who is trying to solve a problem that she has been trying to solve for years is tempted to use a religious act in order to solve her problem – not because she believes that the religious act works because of metaphysical understanding that the world simply is such a place where such act works, but merely as a sort of last resort. It is easier to believe in something that you want to believe than in something that you do not want to believe. This plays a huge role in religious belief all around the world as much as in any other mode of belief as well. People have problems, and they are trying to solve those problems with means that they want to believe in because they want those means to work.

In anthropological inquiry, then, I regard the likes of James Lett, who argued that it is a scientific duty of an anthropologist to “publicly proclaim the falsity of religious beliefs” (1997: 116), as seriously mistaken. I would argue, on the contrary, that there is no validity and there is no falsity in any human aspect of existence. There are purely perceptions of them.

During my fieldwork in Cambodia I mainly studied lives of randomly chosen families, household entities, and social units constituting of people with profound relationships in Praych Doung village in Kampong Svay commune, Kien Svay district, Kandal province, in Central Cambodia. I was able to gain access to the communities, households and extended families in a traditional anthropological sense – through the participant observation method. I speak Khmer as I have studied it with a guidance of a Cambodian friend in Finland since the winter of 2009, and that was an important and necessary condition on being able to accomplish this participation.

The majority of people I interviewed and encountered in Praych Doung village were rather poor, uneducated, rural ethnic Khmers, both men and women (mainly fathers and mothers of families I lived with) aged from approximately 25 to 45. When I refer to “Praych Doung villagers” in this thesis, then, I mean to refer to this specific group of people. I do this based on my observation that the Praych Doung village consists mostly of this demographic group, even though there were others as well – there were a few Vietnamese families, a few well-off families who had been educated in Phnom Penh (and most likely had more urban views on life and on *sasna*), and a few Cham families, whom are Cambodian Muslims and thus practice a completely different religion than the ethnic Khmers. Also, it is worth mentioning that the majority of rural Cambodians live with their parents and their children in one house, so that the same house is occupied by three or more generations. However, I did not speak with the elderly that much as they seemed to like to be on their own. Thus, it happened naturally that I ended up experiencing the religious ideas and the religious behaviour of the Praych Doung villagers aged from 25 to 45, whom all had children of their own. I find this satisfactory because it is more relevant to study the younger people’s behaviour instead of the older people’s behaviour, as then one can know more about the future of *sasna* rather than the history of *sasna*.

As a participant observer, I tried to overcome the challenge of “finding the truth” or being able to sort what is relevant from the overflow of data and information through speaking Khmer all the time as I was in the field. I do not regard myself as a fluent speaker of Khmer, but I can definitely speak it with a pretty high degree of proficiency. I also tried to make my stay as authentic as possible by simply spending time with the villagers trying to establish a position in which I was not the explicit *barang* anymore. At first, I was a sort of hit in the village and many people came to see me surprised that I spoke Khmer. I was, to a rather high extent, like a celebrity. But when I had spent one month or so in the village, the villagers were used to me being around, and that was the time I started doing more serious fieldwork.

I cooked meals with the families, ate with them, looked after their children, went to fish with them, taught them some English and how to play games, played cards with them, followed them to the market and to the Buddhist monasteries, went to hospital with them, and most importantly, hang out with them in order to gain an appreciation for what their actions and lives were about. But the ideas of this thesis also stem from everyday happenings that I encountered not only in Praych Doung village but also elsewhere in Cambodia. It would be correct to say, then, that this thesis is a result of wide and profound experience in Cambodia, and it is from that experience that my assertion derives.

I had a “key informant”, a woman in her 30s, who had a family relationship to a particular household in the area I was studying, and she helped me to contact with several people as well as to provide me with personal histories and general insights on several particularly interesting people I was focusing on. I started my research on merely observing the local people, attending religious ceremonies, weddings, funerals, every day discussions, and basically just trying to overhear things. More than once I had to listen very carefully, because sometimes I just didn’t understand what the Cambodians were saying, and very often I asked my key informant to clarify things in case I would misunderstand something on a crucial moment. I was lucky in that my key informant was held in a high esteem, and she was often contacted by different people in need of help. That’s why I was able to be overhearing several problems they had and to listen to the way such problems were connected to religion or religious activities, emotions, and habits.

Soon enough, however, I decided that I need to interview the people in order to get answers that would be relevant regarding my study. I especially wanted insights on the nexus between all of the religiously driven activities and emotions. The first step was to ask straightforward questions, such as “what is religion”, “what does it mean to you”, “why do you have religion”, “tell me about spirits”, to name a few. When asking such questions, I obviously did not use the English word “religion”, but the Cambodian counterpart *sasna*, as the Praych DOUNG villagers used it.

I also did some fieldtrips within the field, mainly to Kampong Thom province to visit an NGO called Buddhism for Development, to Kampot province for the Khmer New Year in April, and to several Buddhist monasteries near Phnom Penh.

I interviewed several monks in Phnom Penh on not Buddhism but their roles in the society, and I was enlightened (scientifically) on the profound manner of Cambodians visiting monasteries and meeting monks – both in times of trouble and in times of happiness. I also followed through one effort of a Buddhist monk to educate poor countryside women living with AIDS, a development effort in collaboration with a local NGO.

1.3 A Short History of Modern Cambodia

I will discuss in brief the modern history of Cambodia for reasons that are relevant regarding certain ideas I discuss later in the thesis. With modern history of Cambodia I mean roughly the era from the Khmer Rouge regime in 1975-1979 until today. This period of time is

important because the genocide of Cambodians conducted by the Khmer Rouge in the 70s, and all of the ramifications thereafter, have had a huge impact on how Cambodia is today.

The Khmer Rouge, led by the notorious Pol Pot, were a group of rather poor rural Cambodians who disliked private ownership, the rich, and the leadership of the country in the early 70s. They operated a regime, called Democratic Kampuchea (although there was nothing democratic about it), that left roughly 2 million Cambodians dead. They wanted to bring Cambodia back into what they called "Year Zero", meaning that they forced all Cambodians, especially people in big cities such as the capital Phnom Penh, to the countryside and into forced labour. They killed lots of Cambodians whom they suspected to be "enemies of the state", and they also indirectly generated deaths of hundreds of thousands of the forced labourers who worked long hours, did not have enough food, and had no medical help whatsoever.

The horrors and the misery of the Khmer Rouge years in Cambodia have been widely documented, and it is only my intention here to make note of it as it almost completely destroyed Cambodian infrastructure, human capital (in the sense that all of the doctors, teachers, and other highly educated people were killed), political system (most of the civil servants and prior politicians were killed), monetary system (money was abandoned by Pol Pot), education (no one in Cambodia went to school during those years²), and so on. In a word, a huge part of important aspects of civilization and society were wiped out.

Khmer Rouge were defeated on seventh of January, 1979. It was done by the current prime minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen, and a few others – who also hold high positions in the political elite today – who originally were among the Khmer Rouge cadre themselves but fled to Vietnam in 1977 and came back with the assistance of the Vietnamese army. The 80s was a so called Vietnamese era, when Hun Sen ruled with the backing of the Vietnamese government. The re-building of Cambodia started, but it was really slow and ineffective due to corruptive nature of the government and the political elite along with Hun Sen, as they did not have the public interest but their own interest in mind. However, the Khmer Rouge were not completely destroyed during this period, and the resistance of the Khmer Rouge was wide and strong in the remote jungles and highlands of Cambodia. The country continued to be in turmoil and in a state of civil war throughout the 80s, just like it had been during the 70s as well.

In 1992, the United Nations decided that Cambodia needs assistance in establishing democratic political system and democratic elections. They created UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) in which the UN took over Cambodia in order to run first

² I have interviewed one Cambodian who was a teenager during the 80s, and he told me that the Vietnamese-backed government in Cambodia did not allow studying english during the 80s.

democratic elections in Cambodia and to reach peace between different political parties in Cambodia in order to put out violence that had hampered the nation ever since 1970. The Khmer Rouge were included in the elections, even though they had terrorized the country over a period of two decades, placing mines throughout the jungles of Cambodia and pillaging remote villages (which were abundant in Cambodia) and Phnom Penh travelling by buses and trains to rural provinces. UNTAC gave the Khmer Rouge a status as a political party, and enabled people to vote for them. The fact that it was the first time the UN had actually run a previously independent nation-state, and that it was by then the most expensive of all of UN's projects, tells a lot about the state of Cambodia during that time, and about the distress that Cambodians must have felt.

When the elections were finally held in 1993, it was not the current ruling party, Cambodian People's Party (CPP) headed by Hun Sen, who won the elections, but prince Ranariddh's FUNCINPEC party, which won almost 50 per cent of the vote. Cambodian People's Party was second in the election. However, Hun Sen's CPP was not slow in its response to its defeat, after all, they had governed the country during the 80s and Hun Sen had been a Prime Minister of Cambodia since 1985. He managed to establish himself as the second Prime Minister of Cambodia – prince Ranariddh being the first one – and in 1997 he launched a coup resulting in CPP's control of the government and later, in 1998, in CPP winning the elections and Hun Sen becoming the Prime Minister again.

Hun Sen has since gotten a reputation as the strongman of Cambodia, harrasing political opponents, controlling the media, and doing whatever it takes to remain in power. Corruption has been widespread in Cambodia throughout its modern history, and Hun Sen and his political elite have been benefitting from sitting atop of a corrupt system. The elections in Cambodia are held every five years, and everytime they have been held since 1998 (2003/2008/2013), there have been controversy and accusations of irregularities.

During my fieldwork in 2012, along the road that goes from Phnom Penh to the Praych DOUNG village, a distance of some 25 kilometers, there were parts of the road that were paved and parts of the road that were not paved. Those parts that were paved had CPP (the ruling party) signs along the road and on the roofs of people's houses. Those parts that were not paved had Sam Rainsy Party (later to become the Cambodian National Rescue Party, the main opposition party) signs all over them. This reflects the politics of Cambodia today. The ruling Cambodian People's Party announced before the 2013 National Elections that Sam Rainsy Party could not erect signs along the roads of Cambodia like the CPP did, because, as the CPP stated, it is the CPP that has built the roads and thus has an exclusive right to them. In a Western democratic logic, it is the state that builds infrastructure, and any political party has only represented the state for the time

they have elected to do so by the people. The CPP thought it was the party that owned the road, effectively demolishing the whole concept of the state. The logic for CPP is that it uses its own money to help the Cambodian people, such as building roads, and not the public money of the state. It certainly does not think that they are merely representing the state, and that if another political party would be elected fairly in democratic elections, they should be given the chance to represent the state instead. Such is the political nature of the current ruling party of Cambodia – it is far away from a democratic logic.

In conclusion, the modern history of Cambodia has been very violent, volatile, unfair, and from the perspective of the Cambodian people, very poor and hopeless. The reason I wanted to discuss this in brief is that in my opinion, it has a very straightforward impact on Cambodian's religious ideas and beliefs. The fact that Cambodians have had decades of civil war, corruption, politicians whom one cannot trust, poverty, no education, no democracy, and harsh social circumstances, has undoubtedly led to a resurgence of religious beliefs and *sasna* being perhaps the most important source of comprehension and hope regarding one's every day life and the difficulties within it.

1.4 Religion in Cambodia

The official religion of the Kingdom of Cambodia, proclaimed in the country slogan “nation, religion, king”, is Theravada Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism came to Cambodia from India during the great Angkorian era through profound and long-lasting engagement with Indian merchants, political advisors, and diplomats of the time.

Today, Theravada Buddhism is, indeed, the single most important religion in Cambodia and is practiced by Cambodians in many different forms, the main ones being the existence and importance of Buddhist monasteries (*wat*) and Buddhist festivals, such as lifecycle rituals and different celebrations such as the Khmer New Year or the *Pchum Ben*. However, when it comes to actual practical matters on the local village level and generally almost anywhere in the countryside, the whole of religious activity and ideology is a mixture of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Hinduism, which is to say the Indianized religious influences, and the local traditional Khmer animistic influences. This mixture has actually been in place since the times of the first connections between the Khmers and the Indian peoples, and has been evolving as a special mixture ever since.

This is why to emphasize religion in Cambodia as being Therava Buddhism (much in accordance with the current government³) is to commit a huge misconception.

I suggest that people ought not to accept the ideas of the ruling elite and misinterpret Cambodia to be a Buddhist country. First of all, Buddhism varies from country to country and even within a given country due to different interpretations of Buddhism in different communities and on behalf of different individuals. And second, no one in Cambodia (besides the monks, perhaps) sees the world and everything in it as stemming from the Buddhist doctrine only. Even the several official “state rituals”, such as the Royal Ploughing Ceremony or the Royal Coronation rituals, are involved with not only Buddhism but Brahmanism as well. And, when it comes to the everyday religion of the Cambodian villagers in the countryside, the religion can be said to vary from village to village or from family to family due to different combinations of Buddhism, Brahmanism, local animistic beliefs (such as belief in the *neak taa* or the ancestral guardian spirits, village spirits, *pro-leung* or ordinary people’s spirits, and “ghosts”), and Chinese and Vietnamese influences.



Buddhist monk in front of the famous Angkor Wat – temple in Siem Reap province.

³ Indeed, the notion of “nation, religion, king” is a scheme of creating and sustaining a nationalistic ideology that, according to the likes of Benedict Anderson (2006 [1983]), is imagined and for the most part an arbitrary means of controlling a falsely united social entity, a nation state. Thus religion, which is a synonym for Theravada Buddhism in the slogan, is merely imagined as a state religion which exists in *teuk dey* (land) of Cambodia.

Animist practices and Brahmanistic practices are a strong part of Cambodian culture and are deeply intermingled with the everyday practice of Buddhism. They are not considered separate religions but part of the spectrum of choices for dealing with moral, physical, and spiritual needs. Buddhism is a national tradition with a bureaucratic and clear-cut doctrine and a written tradition. Brahmanist and animistic practices are more localized and are passed on from person to person rather than as a formal institution. With the Cambodian way of life, lack of education, and the huge emphasis on localized knowledge due to a lack of internet access and an indifference⁴ towards discussing nationwide matters, the animistic and Brahmanist traditions are of perhaps the greatest importance in the rural areas.

Extensive exploration has been written on the resurgence of Buddhism in Cambodia since 1980s up to this day (Ledgerwood (2008; 2011), Ebihara (2008), Marston (2011), Harris (2008 [2005])). Especially the 1990s saw an explosion of reconstruction of Buddhist temple building and increase in the number of ordained monks. Rural families at subsistence level set aside money to contribute. Indeed, anyone who ventures to 21st century Cambodia is likely to notice beautiful new *wats* popping up from the ground like mushrooms on a beautiful September day. Buddhist ceremonies have increased in both awe and intensity, people attend more Buddhist festivities, and the annual big celebrations, such as the Khmer New Year, are increasingly serving as focal points in the Khmer calendar consciousness. The Praych Doung villagers, for instance, talked a lot about what they will do during the next New Year, which relatives they want to meet, what they want to buy for them, and how much they could be able to give money for supporting different religious ceremonies (usually orchestrated for spirits of their ancestors, friends, family members, or influential famous people).

According to Judy Ledgerwood, the resurgence of the *wats* is “*a result of a combination of factors mentioned above: the desire on the part of local communities to rebuild their own temples, the use of temple construction for political legitimacy on the part of government officials, the importance for monks of being seen as successful builders, and the influx of funds from (relatively) wealthy overseas Khmer*” (Kent: p.160 in *People of Virtue*). This is true, but still the complexity of the reality behind religion in Cambodia is indeed subject to what Arjen Appadurai thought of as the “invention” of “ethnicity and other identity markers” (Appadurai 1990: 18), mainly on behalf of cultural and area studies which constitute the majority of scholarly texts and theories on Cambodia. This invention can be severely misleading. The word “Khmer” in itself is

⁴ During my time in Praych Doung village, for instance, people talked about politics or the daily news fairly rarely, if at all.

already misleading, as it is a category that serves the existence of no real life or natural phenomenon, and to relate that word with Buddhism is of no importance.

Indeed, over the long course of its history, Buddhism has always belonged to the political realm of the kingdom. Since the early days of the Angkorian era, during the time when the great Khmer Empire of Angkor was heavily influenced by Indian traditions and was slowly turned into one of the “Indianized States” (Chandler 2010) of Southeast Asia, Buddhism has always been the subject matter of the royal hegemony, the source of legitimation of the God-Kings’ power, and, in a word, a thing of the elite rather than a thing of the wider public. No doubt Buddhism has had its place among people’s everyday lives as well, but Buddhism has still always been emphasized over the animistic religious predispositions of the local arena in the Khmer universe. Ian Harris, for instance, writes about the importance of Buddhism for the emergence of Cambodian nationalism and “sense of nationhood” (Harris 2005, 228), and that “almost all governments have felt the need to cultivate the Buddhist sector, whatever their political philosophy” (ibid., 230).

I am not trying to denigrate Harris here, or any others, for that matter, because they truly write about the political or societal sphere. But little has been written from the anthropological perspective. When it comes to the anthropological perspective, and to the local village level with its cultural and local peculiarities, then I argue that a set of animistic, locally negotiated and perceived, religious influences, beliefs and values are of more relevance than plain Buddhism.

So, the majority of academic literature and anthropological research on Cambodia hugely emphasize Buddhism over any other religious influence. Such accounts have lots of shortcomings, and they fail to understand that Buddhism, even though arguably the most explicit, visible, and tangible religious influence in Cambodia, is merely a part of a wider whole. Buddhism has its meaningful place in Cambodia, but there are many religious phenomena in Cambodia that cannot be accounted for by Buddhism. Examples of these will be abundant in this thesis. However, next I will discuss Buddhism in Cambodia in order to highlight the few features of Buddhism that are important from an anthropological perspective.

The most important religious influence of Buddhism to the people of Cambodia has been the notion of merit-making, or *ka thwer bon*. Merit-making in Buddhism means that a person can gain good karma through making merit, committing a good deed, and through it influence his or her position in the afterlife (although it is safe to say that many Cambodians could think of it influencing one’s current life as well). Merit-making in the Cambodian conventional context means a religious act in which people give offerings or donations to a certain religious authority, usually contributions for building *wats* or giving food for Buddhist monks. According to Judy Ledgerwood (Kent & Chandler, 2008;), the role of merit making as a dynamic process of interpreting and

negotiating morality is still at the core of Buddhist practice, and that Buddhist practice in turn is the background against which morality is perceived and valued.

The Praych DOUNG villagers were very busy with the *bon*. And the two most often cited reasons for merit-making, firstly that it is done in order to pass merit to one's ancestors, and secondly that it is done in order to gain a better life in one's next existence, were noted by Ledgerwood as well. But, as I found out among the Praych DOUNG villagers, these Buddhist notions of merit-making were mainly activities of the elderly, even though discursively cited by younger villagers as well. But it was the elderly that actually went to the nearby Buddhist monasteries (there were two in the village, and around 4 or 5 in the adjacent villages, depending on how far one should count them) and brought food to the monks and "made merit". This is not that surprising given that the elder people naturally are more interested in the afterlife than the young, and that they have lived during a time of more strenuous hardships (the Khmer Rouge era from 1975 to 1979).

The younger populace were not that interested in merit-making. Some of them went to the *wat* as well, but I reckon it had less impact on their lives than it had on the lives of the elderly. This also showed in the passion by which the elderly talked about merit-making. However, the younger people, who constitute a majority of Cambodians and the Praych DOUNG villagers as well, were more interested in the realm of the supernatural that does not have to do with Buddhism. And, as I stated earlier, even the Buddhist monks themselves in Cambodia often carry protective amulets, foresee people's futures, and engage in activity with the non-Buddhist realm⁵.

Judy Ledgerwood (Kent & Chandler, 2008) claims that the modern-day Khmers move, act, and perform their religious belief in ways that parallel the traditions of Buddhist practice which were the basis of morality. One of my endeavours is to challenge this hegemony of Buddhist discourse going on about Cambodia and remind that when it comes to "everyday religion" of the Cambodian villagers, the religious activities and beliefs vary from village to village or from family to family (indeed, from individual to individual) due to different combinations of Buddhism, Brahmanism, local animistic beliefs (village spirits etc.) as well as foreign influences – and due to different interpretations of religion and different needs that are dealt with through religious activity on an individual level.

However, Ledgerwood (ibid.) further argues that Buddhism (again, I would say religious activity in general) in Cambodia is seen in many different ways by different members of the society. For elders, Buddhism is a range of social habits that have a lot to do with a desire to

⁵ Several experts on Buddhism whom I interviewed in Phnom Penh told me that Buddhism is a religion of compassion, self-enhancement, and living in harmony with both people and nature. Some of them even argued that Buddhism does not need a monastery to be practiced or believed in, criticizing the newly born phenomenon of some Buddhist monks in Cambodia getting involved with the rich and the wealthy and thus building fancy and shiny new monasteries - being thus "competent builders", awing the Cambodian public into loyal relations with them.

gain comfort in the next life (and also comfort in this life as well because a future comfort can be seen as current comfort as well). For young people, Buddhism is a choice in a range of possibilities that includes not only Christianity, but also a host of secular imaginings. With this she is trying to challenge the role of Buddhism in the social constructive processes of creating morality. This definitely is an important idea to keep in mind.

Buddhism also plays a huge role through Buddhist monks, even though again their practices are not strictly Buddhist as Buddhist monks in Cambodia practice a plethora of non-Buddhist ceremonies and rituals. Cambodians often come to see a monk when they need consultation on a family-matter or when their children are sick. They also have a lot of things, such as having a certain kind of dream, which mean that something bad is going to happen and a consultation of a monk is needed.

Perhaps the most visible ritual that Buddhist monks perform in Cambodia is a practice in which they wash people in a “holy water”. This is called *sroich teuk*, which literally means “to water” (the same expression is used with watering plants). They pour small amount of water on to someone’s head and chant in Sanskrit language. The act of washing is a symbol of purity as it is thought to purify the soul of whoever is being “washed”. However, this is a mixture of Buddhist theology and animistic ideology, and it is conducted in a very general fashion in order to gain good luck in almost whatever in which one wants to be lucky. The mean, so to speak, is very explicit, but the gain is vaguely defined and is thus under interpretation. This interpretation is often related to Khmer animistic beliefs, because the idea that a certain problem can be solved in *sroich teuk* is projected in the fact that the problem is seen as a problem from an animistic perspective. Without Khmer animistic problems, such as belief in angry spirits being able to cast bad luck on you, there would be no attempt through *sroich teuk* to solve it.

Clifford Geertz, writing about religious change in Indonesia and Morocco, saw that the great difference between the present situation and the “classis religious styles” of the regions, was that these were “no longer more or less alone in the field but besieged on all sides by dissenting persuasions” (Geertz 1968: 60). Indeed, as I said earlier, it should be noted that there is a distinction between being held by religious convictions and holding them. There’s also a distinction between being held by desires and holding them, or being held by principles and holding them (having principles and living up to them).

I want to make this distinction very clear now. When it comes to Buddhism in Cambodia, one can see that it is an authoritative religion, setting its moral order from outside the human being, as a sort of top-down phenomenon, prescribing to do this and not to do that (according to merit and de-merit, or *bon* and *baab*). Merit is good, de-merit is bad. People are being held by Buddhism. But the animistic beliefs and practices stem from within. They stem from the local people themselves, from their hearts and desires. The plethora of different kinds of animistic beliefs that Cambodians have, especially those of the Praych DOUNG villagers, are beliefs that people are holding, rather than beliefs that are holding people.

This is also why Buddhism has been so successful in Cambodia – because it has not been a totalitarian religion, like Islam seems to be, but it can easily be adopted by people and become just one of the religious influences that are near and dear to the Khmer. Cambodian people have come to hold a few Buddhist ideas in a democratic system in which people use religion in their own favour.

The Buddhist ceremonies, *vithi bon*, are a perfect example of how the Praych DOUNG villagers oriented their material lives in the world. There are several major *vithi bon* in Buddhism, largest of which are the Phcum Ben and the Khmer New Year, but there are many minor *vithi bon* as well. One such ceremony, which has relevance for my thesis, is *vithi bon sout mon*. This ceremony is a popular one all over Cambodia and everywhere else in the Buddhist world. To put it most plainly, it is a ceremony organized in order to get good luck. Business holders and entrepreneurs hold these ceremonies as often as they like in order to increase their income. They believe that when Buddhist monks come to their restaurants and cafes, or factories and airports, and *sout mon*, their sales and profitability increase.

When it comes to the Praych DOUNG village, it is fairly safe to say that lots of people are hopeful in this kind of Buddhist or religious context. During the six months I spent on and off at the village, I witnessed seven *pithi bon sout mon*, and those were only the ones I particularly was invited to see. If I am allowed to take a guess, there must have been dozens of such ceremonies conducted during those six months. It is also safe to argue that the average Praych DOUNG villager did not read books (most of them were illiterate), or otherwise were not in a habit of reading books. Any education or self-education, or creative or critical thinking, was pretty rare. The circulation of discourse in which the knowledge of how to raise pigs was circulating was more or less limited to the local knowledge.

1.5 The Praych DOUNG Village

The Praych DOUNG village lies somewhat 25 kilometres south of Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, along the eastern banks of Tonle Bassac River. At the time of my fieldwork, there were approximately⁶ 4000 citizens in the village. The village is a very typical Cambodian countryside village with majority of the houses being wooden houses on stilts along the main road, and a plethora of different kinds of shops, schools, volleyball fields, and Buddhist monasteries on each side of the road. I would describe Praych DOUNG as slightly above the average in terms of wealth and money, as the road is paved and there are some quite large concrete houses too.



The main livelihood methods in Praych DOUNG are trading and raising livestock, mainly pigs and chicken. But there is only one bigger piggery that had over 1000 pigs during the time of my visit. Most of the Praych DOUNG villagers had merely one or two sows in the family with the occasional litter. Indeed, all of the Praych DOUNG families I saw or was acquainted with had

⁶ I use the word “approximately” here as the official Cambodian population registers and censuses are nothing but inaccurate due to officials’ indifference and corruption. Also, in Cambodia it is very usual for people to change their location and residence often due to lack of stable job opportunities. People often travel from one place to another in search of work, and in the most severe cases in search of food and shelter at their relatives’ or neighbors’ houses.

small family businesses of raising poultry or pigs, or having a small shop at the front of their house. Cambodians tend to have lots of children, and in almost all of the Praych DOUNG families there were more than seven members in the household. Most of the villagers lived with their parents or grandparents, and so there were often three generations living in the same house. This also means that any possessions were shared within the household so that, for instance, one motorbike had probably from two to three users, and personal belongings were scarce and rare. The Praych DOUNG village might not have been among one of the poorest villages in Cambodia, but whatever they had, they had it together as a more or less common possession.

The only proletarian group I found at Praych DOUNG was construction workers. The average monthly salary for the construction workers I interviewed at Praych DOUNG village, to give an example, was around \$100⁷. This means that there is a huge gap between labourers and the rich in Praych DOUNG. The wealth gap is even more astonishing when one realizes that everything in Cambodia, including Praych DOUNG, is not cheap. Even if it is true that vegetables, fish, meat, and foodstuffs in general are pretty cheap, they are not that cheap anymore. Also, one litre of gasoline is 5000 riel, or \$1,25, which means that the average monthly salary equals from 24 to 40 litres of gasoline, whereas in Finland the average monthly salary equals well over 1000 litres of gasoline (given that the average monthly salary in Finland is over \$2000 and one litre of gasoline costs around \$2).

Motorbikes, the single most important means of transportation especially for rural Cambodians, as well as for the Praych DOUNG villagers, cost from \$1000 to \$2000 and even more. The Praych DOUNG construction worker would have to work for 10 months in order to buy a cheap new motorbike. The rich people in Cambodia, however, or even what might be called the middle class consisting of small-scale entrepreneurs and such, gain monthly easily as much as the Finnish average monthly salary, and this is why the wealth gap is so wide in Cambodia. Even in Praych DOUNG village, some very rich people lived next to labourers with monthly salaries of \$100.

The above discussion is to say that there is a huge class division embedded in the Praych DOUNG community, which relates to Cambodian language as well. This class division, and the fact that it is almost impossible to transcend one's class due to a system of respect and corruption that sustains the division, has a great significance to the way Praych DOUNG villagers think things should be.

⁷ The overall average monthly salary in Cambodia has said to be somewhere around \$30 to \$50. Exact figures do not exist.



The education in Cambodia has been of little effect in the countryside due to several reasons. Currently there is a trend of English Language schools, institutes, and training centres popping up here and there like mushrooms in autumn. In Praych DOUNG I saw four English schools, all of which were cheap wooden structures with not enough classrooms and, by no surprise, not enough teaching materials. However, as none of the parents spoke any English, they were not able or willing⁸ to teach their children at home. Apart from stating how important it is to send one's children to school, there was no specific enthusiasm towards education in Praych DOUNG. Indeed, in Praych DOUNG most of the elderly were illiterate, a great deal of the middle-aged villagers was illiterate, and the children, even though being literate due to the newly re-established schooling system, were not interested in reading anything.

The fact that the Praych DOUNG villagers were illiterate and far from well-read or cultured and knowledgeable has importance as it facilitates certain kind of circulation of discourse (Urban 1996), in which rumours and hearsay makes up for a huge part of people's knowledge. Because people at Praych DOUNG can not read, they can only learn or know things through their

⁸ Even when it comes to the regular primary schools in Praych DOUNG, no parents taught their children outside school hours or supported their children in terms of education. Is that because the parents themselves have never been to school and thus cannot offer much help? Maybe it is because there is no habit of paying much attention to education or civilizing oneself in the Cambodian culture. I have never seen a Cambodian read a book outside of Phnom Penh. Usually the children have to take care of their younger siblings and help their mothers with household chores after schooldays. Also, I found out that the schools in Praych DOUNG had day-offs pretty often without no particular reason, which was a bit strange to me.

mouth-to-mouth contacts, which is to say other Praych DOUNG villagers – peoples' neighbours and close kin. This kind of system increases circulation of such knowledge that is somewhat local – in its context and usefulness – and rather undisputed, as people merely know what other people know.

In Praych DOUNG, the influence of the elderly was huge. The most common answer to an inquiry regarding the source of someone's information was: "I heard it from the elderly" (*khnom leu cah cah ni-yeiy*). And, as I found out, the information transmitted through the elderly was partly Buddhist and partly everything else. The lack of education complies with this. As there are no other channels through which to absorb knowledge, no internet and no books⁹, the localized cultural knowledge is often the only option left for Praych DOUNG villagers. For instance, I found out that around 70 to 80 per cent of the Praych DOUNG villagers as well as many of their relatives all over Cambodia switched their phones every time it rained. This was due to a belief that lightning might strike one's phone if one uses it while it rains. This belief was not so much based on a scientific research but on a mouth-to-mouth circulation of knowledge – in a word, rumour.

The main properties of practical Buddhism that has been discussed in the literature on Cambodia, namely merit-making, respecting one's relatives in Buddhist ceremonies, celebrating the largest Buddhist calendar festivals such as Phcum Ben and the Khmer New Year, adhering to Buddhist precepts, and respecting *thngai sal*, were lively in Praych DOUNG. Especially merit-making, or *thwer bon*, was something that many Praych DOUNG villagers were doing every day. However, what merit-making means in terms of morality, and what exactly defines merit, is the most arbitrary phenomenon. What making merit means concretely in Praych DOUNG is that whenever a representative of the monastery is collecting money, or a Buddhist monk is collecting money on his daily routine (*dar ben bat*), or whenever someone wants to go to the monastery and give alms or gifts to the monks, people merely give money to whoever is in question and consider that act as merit-making. It is, in other words, fundamentally an act of habitual money giving. It is foremost an economic act, and secondarily an act of merit in its religious sense. The poor people are considered to be poor due to lack of merit, and their inferior social slots are then accepted and respected as a part of Buddhist hierarchical universe (because merit-making is morally accepted as an economic act in which the rich obviously can make more merit than the poor). This universe

⁹ Cambodians do not read books, and certainly not so in the countryside. None of the houses in Praych DOUNG village had bookshelves or cases and, indeed, most of the villagers were not able to read (let alone being able to read critically). Once I bumped into a Cambodian man in Phnom Penh who, after seeing me reading a book, told his friend that "all the foreigners are the same, they read books".

creates deterministic communities in which no one can really move between different “social slots” due to merit-making is not essentially a moral but an economic act. This is why Buddhism creates passiveness, as people generally accept this kind of hierarchy and do not realize that the hierarchy is self-sufficient.

The Buddhist monasteries around the Praych DOUNG area as well as in the wider district area of Kien Svay were abundant. There were two main monasteries in the village, but when I ventured a bit further away from Praych DOUNG within the Kien Svay district I found dozens of monasteries – some smaller, some larger. Probably the most elegant and decorative of them all was *wat moha mintrey*, which was still under construction at the time of my fieldwork but already had a miniature Angkor Wat on the premises and a huge Buddha statue at the Southern end of the monastery. The monastery area was large and the *vihear* (the main building with the statue of the Buddha in front of which people light incense sticks as well as pray for Buddha and wish for better future), *sala* (a hall in which monks, the *achar*, and the so called Buddhist nuns or *don jii* reciprocate people’s offerings to monks into good fortune, and also where they consume the offerings), and *kot* (monks’ residences) were larger than in any other monastery within Kien Svay area.

The *wat moha mintrey* was an example of the way in which Buddhist monasteries are being built throughout Cambodia these days. The building of Buddhist monasteries in Cambodia has experienced a major increase in the 21st century due to both contributions of the overseas Khmers as well as to the economic growth within the country itself. And, as I witnessed in Praych DOUNG, this also influences the manner in which Cambodians orient themselves towards the monasteries. I agree with Kobayashi Satoru’s (2005) claims that the temples no more are “centres of village life” as asserted by May Ebiara (1968: 382, 398) in her famous pre-Khmer Rouge research in Svay village (in Kandal province). What Ebiara observed was that back then in the 1960s the Svay village where she did her research was characterised by a sort of one-on-one correspondence with a Buddhist monastery in that the villagers chose one Buddhist monastery to “belong” to and that monastery then became central in their lives. Kobayashi challenged this static view and claimed that villagers may choose to participate in a number of temples in a very flexible manner.

In Praych DOUNG village, people were no members of any temple in the way Ebiara stated but rather were involved in a number of temples according to their personal histories. The Praych DOUNG villagers visited temples in which their dear relatives’ ashes were buried, near or far from their own village. Also, people told me that one can pray for Buddha in any temple. Indeed, during the Pchum Ben festival, the festival for revering the dead, several Praych DOUNG villagers tried to visit as many temples as possible during the 15-day-period of the festival.

This is important for my study of morality and socio-cultural change because it illustrates how people are searching for solutions (besides happiness, of course) for their unique problems they are facing in life (whether it be a reverence for a dead mother or merely trying to overcome a bad dream). It should be understood that there are lots of different reasons for visiting a Buddhist temple. However, Buddhist monasteries resurgence in the 21st century does not mean a revival of Buddhism, because the temples are no longer “centres for village life” but merely means to meet one’s ends and reach one’s goals. For some, like the PM Hun Sen and the like, those goals can be keeping the voters happy by contributing to a construction of a *wat*, while for others the temples are signs of economic growth in Cambodia – yet for others it is merely “nice to have lots of beautiful *wats*”.

No one in Praych DOUNG village that I interviewed or encountered hinted anything towards what I would like to call the properties of Buddhism as a world religion. These properties would be, in anthropological sense, written scriptures, other-worldly orientation, reaching nirvana, interest to Buddha’s life as a “Messianic” figure, and so on. Even the notion of the middle path and the four precepts of Buddhism were not that well known.

In turn, what in anthropology would be called properties of a tribal religion, such as transmission of religious or supernatural knowledge orally, this-worldly orientation, and a relatively large amount of spirits and other supernatural beings, popped up all the time and were more often talked about, referred to, or used as a basis for behaviour.

My point here is that even though Buddhism clearly is something that anthropologists would refer to as a “world religion”, that is to say a fully developed and doctrinally complex yet clearly defined religion, the way Buddhism is observable throughout the Cambodian countryside, especially in Praych DOUNG, tends to be more involved with the aspects of Buddhism that are confined to a single village (meaning that in another village the nuances of Buddhism would be different) and are strongly implying the inseparable nature of Buddhism and social life. It is my aim to discuss this aspect of Buddhism combined with the animistic aspects of social life in the third chapter in order to generate an idea of how in Praych DOUNG village, these aspects are related to socio-cultural change through their local nature. The challenges for social viability vary from village to village, and thus the way people use religion or perceive it also varies locally. Morality plays an important role in defining the social arena of village life, and this is the link between social morality (to me, all morality is social morality) and religion.

In conclusion, the people in Praych DOUNG village prayed a lot, they burned incense sticks a lot, revered the spirits a lot, consulted religious leaders (such as Buddhist monks or *kru khmer*) a lot, donated food to Buddhist monasteries a lot, and went to spiritual gatherings a lot. In

one word, they engaged with the spiritual world a lot. These actions were measures to live successfully in a world full of spirits – a world that they really believed existed. They were making ends meet. A shop-owner kept a spirit shrine and offered water, soft drinks, rice-wine, candy, pastries, fake dollars, whatever, to the spirits there so that his or her shop would be successful.¹⁰

However, as I proceed to show in this thesis in the following chapters, religion, or *sasna* in Praych Doung village, has not so much to do with social life, but instead its relevance can be seen on the individual level.

¹⁰ People who do that might easily be less inclined to commit to sociological, material, or economic actions in order to get successful. I have seen this even at the Bangkok Airport, where shop-owners throw water that has been consecrated or sanctified in a Buddhist *wat* or by some other religious professional everywhere at their shops to make business more lucrative. They do this instead of marketing, coming up with new flavors or new offers, changing the interior design, trying to think about the target group of their business, or increasing sales through “public service”. I find this as a sign of uneducation.

2. Emphasis on the Individual

2.1 Individuals Living in a Poor Countryside

The modern history of Cambodia has been one of the most violent and most horrendous of the 20th century. The genocide of the Pol Pot regime in 1975 and 1979 killed almost 2 million Cambodians and members of minorities, such as the Vietnamese and the Chinese, and the Cambodian people learned how to live their lives in secret and never to criticize one's superiors. Ordinary people in Cambodia have had no power, and they have mainly kept themselves busy growing rice and living relaxed and silent lives. Their lives have been rather difficult, and there has never been too much food on the table. I argue that this has influenced the religious affairs in Cambodia even during the late 20th century in a way that has strengthened people's belief in spirits. This is because belief in spirits that are able to help people has probably been the only way many people have made sense of their lives and given them hope for their future.

Hence, religion in Cambodia is hope. It is faith that life can be lived, especially in a way that one wants to live it. Individuals who live in a poor country in very poor and adamant conditions often use some sort of religious aspects of life in order to psychologically survive.

When I conducted my fieldwork in Praych DOUNG village, there was little interest on behalf of anybody towards history or chronically oriented texts or folklore. This was obviously due to a vast illiteracy among the villagers, whom accordingly did not give much attention to such things as books, historical stories, or proverbs. They were more intrigued by the "here and now", things that were happening today in their real life, and things that they felt strongly about. Cambodia, due to its violent recent history, is probably a pretty special place. No one was too eager to speak about the Khmer Rouge, and people just wanted to live their lives in peace. This emphasis on the "here and now" relates well with rural Cambodians' tendency to focus individually on their own every day problems.

My claim is that Cambodians are case specific believers in religious aspects that have regard in their personal problems. Geertz says that "mere conventionalism satisfies few people in any culture" (1973: 131). From what I have seen in Cambodia, I would say that conventionalism to address several problems in people's lives through religious methods is not only true, but inevitable. Whatever happens to cure one's child has the authority in that particular case and time; thus it could be said that the popularity of religions or religious activity in Cambodia stems not from the fact that

religion yields “an aura of factuality” or that they are authoritative but from the inevitable fact that they do not. Indeed, if religions were true and authoritative, then they would be common sense and no one would need gods and good spirits to create hope.

2.2 Model For Reality – Psychological Functions of Religion

Clifford Geertz talks about two theoretical aspects of religion, namely religion as being a “model of reality” and religion being a “model for reality” in his work *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1993 [1973]). In this chapter, I argue that when one analyses religious behaviour in Praych DOUNG village, one should only focus on the latter. The religious behaviour in the Cambodian countryside, for the rural villagers who have no essentially established experience with any one religion, such as Buddhism or Christianity, but who gather bits and pieces of different animistic religious influences, expresses a system that can be modelled rather well with Geertz’s idea of religion as a model for reality.

Geertz’s models of reality are what Kevin Schilbrack calls “symbolic conceptions of the general order of existence” (Schilbrack 2005: 429), which means that religion serves as a sort of gateway between proper conduct and whatever reality any particular religion describes.

The models for reality, the more important of the two in this study, mean that religions tend to guide the believers into certain kinds of behaviours and emotions. The models of and models for reality are imminently a two-way-street as the “general order of existence” (defined by religion) and the proper conduct or the orders on how to act in the world are in a reciprocal relationship – “religious facts imply religious values and vice versa” (Schilbrack 2005: 432).

However, I found in Praych DOUNG village that the villagers there were not expressing exact statements of the “general order of existence” or of the laws of the world and of reality. What I found, rather, was that all of the Praych DOUNG villagers acted religiously, for instance offering fruits and rice wine for guardian spirits of their land believing they would be lucky in rice-farming in exchange, because they that might or might not work. When I spoke with the villagers, none of them actually stated that “this is the truth”, or “one should offer fruit to spirits because the spirits really do exist”. In short, there was no metaphysical analysis of whether their religious behaviour was in an exact accordance with reality or not. The reasons for Praych DOUNG villagers’ religious behaviour, conducting different rituals for instance, were more of a psychological nature. Mostly it had to do with reassurance, as several villagers reported that they felt more comfortable with knowing they had at least tried to please the spirits – were the spirits really existing or not.

The models for and models of reality are important because I do think that religions, or different religious views, ideas, beliefs, and so forth, serve as conceptual schemes. They are not conceptual schemes in the illegitimate epistemological sense, as “lenses on otherwise uninterpreted world stuff” (ibid. 444), like Schilbrack says. Religions merely add a touch on the process of perception and comprehension just like any other influences do ranging from language to cognitive properties of individuals. And because humans are essentially psychological beings, their feelings and emotions are easily influenced by religious ideas and beliefs, which in turn influence their behaviour and cognitive perception.

In other words, the Praych DOUNG villagers I encountered did not know that guardian spirits do exist, but the existing belief in them at least made them possible. And it is this possibility of spirits, rather than ontological knowledge in them, that makes Praych DOUNG villagers to act religiously. For instance, when I asked one woman in her 30s about the existence of spirits, she replied to me: *“I think there are spirits, and it is better to please them as a preventive action even if there are no spirits.”* This is one example of how the Praych DOUNG villagers used religion (their belief in spirits) in order to satisfy psychological needs that relate to emotions. Feelings of fear, for instance, were repressed by this system of spirits that are able to help people in exchange for offerings. I asked a neighbour of my landlord about feelings of fear, and he replied to me: *“Yes, I think I would be afraid... or maybe worried... if I did not live my life on good terms with the spirits.”*

I believe, much like the Praych DOUNG villagers believe in spirits, that at least the Praych DOUNG villagers were not held by religious convictions. On the contrary, they held religious convictions. This is what Clifford Geertz did when he made the distinction between being held by religious convictions and holding them. The latter is of importance here because it leaves room for human agency and because it is closer to the human reality. People do not merely believe in religion (or not believe), but they use religion or religious aspects of life in complex ways in order to achieve a plethora of objectives and desires.

Thus, following Geertz, it is more important to trust a religious utterance, thought, or habit than to believe or practice it. Religious activity of social groups and individuals could be even something more. Leaving all the theological and definitional aspects of different religions aside, religious activity could be perceived to include all of the activities that have something to do with trust. Thus science could be perceived as a religion as well. Science, just like religion, gives us tools to understand and classify the world in a way that makes us to trust our understanding. And, again, trust is our psychological need.

The Praych DOUNG villages needed to trust in something. For instance, when someone bought a pig and arranged a ritual to enhance his own prospects with the pig, he or she

performatively created trust that he would be successful due to the ritual. The ritual does not necessarily have to have anything to do with reality, in this case how healthy piggies the newly acquired sow would give, but with trust and other psychological things that people need.

Geertz's idea that meaning is extrinsic and objective (culturally and socially transmitted from individual to another), is begging for a clarification. The truth is that some information, at least as far as religious information is concerned, is extrinsic and outside any individual's mental phenomena whereas some information is more personal and individually derived. What I mean is that even though religious aspects and religious activity is socially transmitted in a more or less exact way, the most essential thing about it still is the way people can navigate through such given cultural information. Culture gives people boundaries within which to act (such as the readiness in Cambodia to believe in a religious rumour concerning healthcare), but at any given time the individual has room of life in the given boundary (such as choosing to believe this belief over that). As I found in Praych DOUNG village in Cambodia, there can never be only one meaning in any symbolic or religious conception, indeed they are often oppositional, and this is why a meaning can never exist outside of an individual's mental state. There would be no meanings without cognitivity of humanity. The "cognitivist fallacy" that Geertz talks about is off the point in that it is not correct.

Let me give another example. There was a woman in Praych DOUNG village who was apparently trying to save her child by lying to everyone that she was born in the rabbit's year instead of the pig's year. This was not necessarily due to a strong belief, or knowledge, that a large proportion of the children who were born during the year of the pig die at a young age, but due to a fear that it might be so. But how should lying help reality to change. If one believes that children of the year of the pig are in grave danger, then they should be so regardless of other people not knowing about that. Indeed, there was no exactness about the situation, only psychological self-reassurance of the woman who was worried about her child. This implies that she did not know it to be fact that her child was in danger, but she was afraid and worried that it might be so, and her lies to other people were probably nothing more than protective maternal instincts.

So, to conclude this sub chapter, I argue that not everything in Geertz's definition of religion is consistent with what I observed in Praych DOUNG. I argue that the Praych DOUNG villagers' religious aspects, such as religious rituals, are based on emotions and psychological needs. Geertz holds that a religion's metaphysical nature is its attempt to legitimate its ethos. Religions need the models of reality in order to legitimate and make sense of the models for reality. Geertz himself puts it like this: "Religion supports proper conduct by picturing a world in which such conduct is common sense" (Geertz 1973: 129). This is the metaphysical nature of religion for

Geertz, as religion becomes synonymous with reality, and this is why religious activity becomes, so to speak, activity that makes sense in the real world. This is what Geertz means by religion being a cultural system, because everything cultural serves to create an illusionary world in which any particular cultural activity makes sense.

On the contrary, the Praych DOUNG villagers do not believe in their religious views as the “model of reality” suggests, because they do not hold that their religious views are reality. They do not make metaphysical statements about the world or their religious beliefs. Most of them do not believe that their beliefs are true at all, but are worried, afraid, or desperate in front of severe problems such as poverty. I argue that the Praych DOUNG villagers think it is better to act in accordance with possible spirits and be wrong in their belief in such spirits than to not act in accordance with the spirits and be right in their beliefs. Geertz’s idea that people often try to live “realistically” (1973: 130) in the world, that is, in a way that has relevance in the real world, would be satisfactory only if the Praych DOUNG villagers made metaphysical statements – which they did not. As I see it, the Praych DOUNG villagers were not sure about reality and thus did not claim to act “realistically”. They were merely experiencing both religion and reality, and acting religiously to be on the safe side.

The metaphysical interpretation of religion also shares the problematique of including the presupposition that people have the concept of “nature of things” or “reality”, or in other words that they really do believe in religion. In order to believe one needs faith, otherwise it is too easy to misinterpret the habit of doing what one’s grandparents have told one to do as belief.

By this I mean that even though Geertz includes in his definition the “models for reality”, the models for reality are merely models that are used when needed. They can be used to meet ends that are known to be against such models, and are anyhow not authoritative at all but, on the contrary, are being used in reaching both social and individual needs and goals. I will dwell into these two different aspects of religiosity in much more detail in the third chapter of this thesis. For now, it is enough to notice that even though Geertz seems to be right in that religious practices are often grounded in some sort of religious explanations of “reality”, the way in which at least Cambodians exercise their tendency to religious thinking and acting is way more phenomenological than that.

2.3 An Example of a Girl Who Had a Dream

So far in chapter 3 I have established that Cambodians tend to use the supernatural in dealing with personal and private problems and issues, often due to psychological needs. Here I give the reader one example of a girl from Praych Doung village who had a bad dream. To be more exact, she had a dream in which she, as she kindly told me, had a broken tooth and there was blood coming out of her mouth. The next morning she went with her brother-in-law and me (they kindly let me accompany them) to a nearby Buddhist monastery. During the motorbike ride to the monastery, I heard them talking in Khmer about the situation. I paid attention to the fact that they had decided to go to a Buddhist monastery because there had been blood in the dream. That was a sign that a bad spirit, perhaps a member of her kinship group who'd passed away, an angry ancestor, was threatening her safety.

We arrived at the monastery, and she went to see a monk. The monk and her then went inside the monastery, and she was asked to undress. She then wore a towel and went into a sort of a bathroom, where the monk washed her in what presumably was some kind of holy water. They conducted what Cambodians call a “*sroich teuk*” ritual. It is believed that when one who has been threatened by a bad-tempered spirit is washed with holy water by a Buddhist monk, one is safe. However, when we started to head back to her house, the Buddhist monk who had organised the ritual told her that it would be good for her to stay at her house for the next three days, and she should not travel far from home under any circumstances.

This example, in my opinion, is a case of religion being a model for reality, and it takes place on the individual level. The girl tried to protect herself after having received a threat (which was a belief, at least from a scientific empirical perspective). And, in this case, she did not necessarily have to believe that having gone through the *sroich teuk* ritual she was 100 per cent safe, but it was nonetheless a smart thing to do as it took merely half an hour of her time and if the belief was true, she was better off after the ritual. I would argue, then, that ritual in Praych Doung village is social in that it is shared by all of the villagers and they all understand what is happening, unlike the foreign anthropologist, when one has such a bad dream. With no computers and internet access in Praych Doung village, the only source of information and knowledge, in this case on how to be safe, comes from the village. But the shared ritual is needed and used on an individual level.

The *sroich teuk* ritual in Cambodia is a good example of what Victor Turner said about rituals:

“A ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence

preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests."
(1972: 1100)

The preternatural entity or force in Praych DOUNG village is the spirit, *praleung*, in Khmer. It can be a guardian spirit of the village, or "owner" of the land (*majah teuk dey*), or someone's spirit who has crossed on to the other side and now haunts people from the afterlife (which might be ghosts to Western people). The nature and details of the spirits in Praych DOUNG village were not exact. When I asked questions about the spirits, I got no detailed or specific answers about them. There was no specific metaphysical "reality" about them in that they were not specifically described. This implies, like I have argued earlier, that the spirits were not believed totally, as being 100 per cent true, but they were feared, in that people thought they might be true.

There were a few social rituals in Praych DOUNG village that I found which were organized according to Buddhist ritual. These were mainly life-crisis rituals, such as funerals and weddings. But these were rather individual in their nature as well. After all, it is the individual that dies and that gets married (to another individual). The only social character that I can think of with regard to these (and other) rituals was that the rituals were objects of competition. In Cambodian culture, the notion of losing one's face is a very important aspect. If one is not able to organize a proper funeral, or better yet, a bigger funeral than one's neighbours have organized, for someone who has passed away, then one will lose one's face. Also, the competitive nature of organizing large funerals and flamboyant weddings has to do with bragging rights and showing to others how successful one has been in one's economic endeavours.

I argue that the supernatural are cultural symbols, something that have both cultural value and representative power. Victor Turner talked about "the operational meaning" of symbols (Turner 1967 (1974): 50). In short, by the operational meaning of symbols Turner meant an equation of a symbol with its practical use so that a meaning of a symbol is its affectivity (Turner, *ibid* 51). So, in other words, I claim that the meaning of the *sroich teuk* ritual is its affectivity, which is the emotional comfort and reassurance that one receives from the ritual. Whatever elicits the ritual (usually a threat for one's health, wealth, safety, good luck, and the like) is deemed harmless through the ritual, which brings about psychological ease. This is the psychological nature of ritual in Praych DOUNG, and this happens with the individual. The social cohesion, structure, and the like, are not affiliated with these rituals.

2.4 The Symbolism of the Shrine or the Spirit House



A powerful dominant symbol in Cambodian culture is the shrine or the spirit house. I found out that there are two meaningful categories of different kinds of shrines or spirit houses, namely *jom-neang* and *kong-mar*. My informants told me that the former has to be above the ground, usually quite high on a wall near the ceiling inside the house, whereas the latter always sits on the floor and is placed in line with the external door so that it is right in front of someone who enters the house. The exegesis of the difference between these two kinds of shrines was that the *jom-neang* is meant for spirits or superhuman beings that are more or less connected with the success of the household, and the *kong-mar* is meant for ancestral spirits and more humanly spirits who reside in the house. In Phnom Penh, for instance, one can find a *jom-neang* in every restaurant, bar, massage-parlor, and any other kind of shop as well, where people need good luck for their businesses, whereas *kong-mar* is more often found only in places where people actually live and sleep. *Kong-mar* is used for revering and remembering dead relatives, and they often come with attached photographs (where applicable) of the deceased.

The shrine found outside the house, often a small wooden structure on a concrete pedestal, is regarded as a home for ancestral spirits whom were once residents of the land (even

though foreign spirits from far-away places can reside in the exterior shrine as well). These are referred to as *pteah neak ta* or *roung neak ta*, literally “house [of] person grandfather”. *Neak ta* is a Cambodian spirit who is believed to be the “real” owner of the land (*majah teuk dey*), or the “real” landlord, and people now living on the land are merely second in the pegging order. What is illuminant here is the fact that the primary function, if you will, of the shrines and the spirit houses according to the Praych DOUNG villagers is the provision of accommodation for ancient and ancestral spirits. What people usually do is they offer rice wine, incense sticks, fruits, food, flowers, and fake money for the spirits who live in the shrines. The logic is simple: Cambodians think that human beings are inferior to the spirits, because the spirits are afraid to be more powerful and being able to use “magic”¹¹. It makes sense to have good relations with such rather powerful spirits

These spirit houses are dominant at least in two senses. In Victor Turner’s discussion, dominant symbols, like the “milk tree” for the Ndembu, are “regarded not merely as means to the fulfillment of the avowed purposes of a given ritual, but also and more importantly refer to values that are regarded as ends in themselves, that is, to axiomatic values” (Turner 1967:20). Symbols are integral parts of social processes because they manage and guide them in terms of values and norms. In the case of the spirit houses in Praych DOUNG village, the dominance comes from this observance. First, the spirit houses are used as means to gain desirable ends, and second, the spirit houses are not merely that but also values in their own right. Let me reiterate what happened to me one day in Praych DOUNG.

One day a couple of young men invited me to play badminton on a grass field right next to my rented brick house. The “house” was a small room with no toilet and a padlock which I had to lock every time I stepped outside for safety reasons. So, when I answered yes to the young men’s invitation, even though I went merely 20-30 meters away from the door, I had to lock the padlock. I pushed the lock into a click, and it was locked. We played badminton for an hour or so, and when I finally called it quits after an exhaustingly hot and sweaty session of racketing, I found out that I had lost my key.

And so we started the search. We, I and the boys I played badminton with, and some girls nearby looked for my key for nearly two hours to no avail. We raked the grass field thoroughly, but no one could find my key. It was not until I would give up the hope that one girl who was carrying some clothes we had taken off in the midst of our sporting session found the key in the middle of the clothes. We had no idea how on earth the key had gone from my pocket into the pile of our clothes.

¹¹ Magic in the sense that they are able to do things that living people cannot do, such as bringing forth good or bad luck, making people get sick and die, and so on.

The boys had a very intriguing explanation: a spirit who lives in the lawn must have hidden the key. Indeed, there was a small “spirit house” on the lawn which apparently was the home of that particular spirit. The locals reasoned that the spirit must have been irritated by us being too loud and playful on the field. The right course of action, then, was to sacrifice a bunch of bananas to that spirit via putting the bananas on the “porch” of the small spirit house. The locals instructed me that the bananas mustn’t be touched until the next day so that the spirit had enough time to “consume” it (the word they used in Khmer was not to “consume” or to “eat” but a more abstract one which roughly translates into “benefit” or “utilize”).

The sacrificing of the bananas was also to be done because the boys and girls who had helped me to search for the key were happy that my key had been found. The idea that the spirit was the culprit and that the spirit had been a crucial factor in finding the key was articulated to me very clearly, but not as an undisputable fact. Rather, it was a possibility. But what was important was that the fruits were offered essentially so that such mishaps would have a happy ending in the future as well. The flow of such problems being fluently solved was a pleased one. The shrine was associated with people’s desires and interests, because every time one did something of importance or of essence, the spirits were addressed.

But also, as to not merely satisfy myself with this utilitarian view (and to not disappoint Sahlins with functionalism¹²), the offering and the belief in spirits living in spirit houses was also a value in its own right. It is not merely that the Praych Doung villagers utilized such a belief in order to reach a certain goal or target, but the shrine and the spirits also were associated with social values, interests, and motives. To have a shrine and to please the spirits living in the shrine was, for them, a pursuable end which had its own value. The shrine, then, can be seen as legitimizing and representing different social action. It serves as a good starting point for observing and analyzing what is respected and accepted in Cambodian culture, and, to extent this onto a wider context, what kind of moral order is in effect in the Cambodian conventional arena. The meaning of a shrine or a spirit house, or any cultural symbol for that matter, is embedded with value, respect, and acceptance – in a word, with moral value. The meaning may be determined from a structure, in which the meaning of a single symbol or single aspect of a symbol becomes existent in accordance with all of the other symbols in that structure, and from the relationship of the symbols to one

¹² Marshall Sahlins has argued in favor of a cultural logic instead of a functional logic in all of humanly activities on earth. This presumption of his can be found in several of his books (2004 [1972]; 2002 [1993]; 2004), and it basically means that the reason for human behaviour, in any given culture, is in accordance with culturally given values and meanings to different actions. Human behaviour cannot be reduced to being a servant of different needs, because the needs and the methods to satisfy those needs are culturally determined. Of course one can imagine that human behaviour is functional in serving cultural needs or culturally constructed and culturally judged needs, but this is not what the mainstream functionalism in anthropology has been about.

another. The structure here means the totality of cultural symbols and values in the consciousness of a given social community. We have come to see this very clearly in the works of both Clifford Geertz and Marshall Sahlins, among others.

The idea here is that the ideological aspect of meaning of symbols, what Turner called “the arrangement of norms and values that guide and control persons as members of social groups and categories” (Turner 1967: 28), is more meaningful on the individual level in Praych Doung village rather than on the social level. It is so because it is the socially shared norms and values that guide individual Praych Doung villagers in their own every day challenges. The fact that they are shared means that other people can relate to them and that they are sustained in a social circulation (as in the Praych Doung village one can only learn from other Praych Doung villagers, because there is no internet and because the educational level is so poor). Praych Doung villagers can give advice to others, but the objective of the cultural idea, in this case the belief in the spirit house and all its ramifications, remains within the individual. In short, the belief in the spirit house mainly manifests itself within a context of solving individual problems, such as finding my key in the above example.

2.5 Need For Causal Explanation

In this chapter, I have put the emphasis on the individual, because I argue that the Praych Doung villagers essentially express religiosity as individuals. Religious rituals are something that are conducted and orchestrated on the individual level – for oneself. Even rituals that might be targeting the whole of Cambodia (such as the Royal Ploughing Ceremony conducted in Phnom Penh which is held to predict whether the growing season will be succesful or not, and which crops will be plentiful) influence individuals through emotions as such rituals make people feel safe ad reassured that everything is good in “my country”.

The last thing I want to point out regarding the individual level is a need for causal explanation. This is Geertz “model for reality” again. It means that people “use” religious ideas, and vest power in spirits, because they are trying to make interventions in their lives. They are trying to make their lives better, more liveable, and easier. I argue that people have a need for causal explanation (because everywhere in the world people explain things) so that they would be able to solve whatever problems they might face in life. Religion, or *sasna* in Cambodia, offers this kind of “understanding” in a way that it serves as a model for reality. It guides people to make

interventions, such as organize rituals in order to influence spirits that in turn have power to, say, heal a person, make one lucky, or protect one's pigs.

Thus, I give individuals – both as creative individuals and as members of social order driven by social psychology – more credit than Durkheim did, for instance, who merely saw that ritual preceded belief and that “men do not weep for the dead because they fear them; they fear them because they weep for them.” (Durkheim 1965: 447) My understanding would be, rather, that regardless of whichever came first, belief or practice, people's already established religious practices support the existence of religious beliefs and vice versa. The true intricacy of the problem lies in the fact that people have a need for causal explanation. All individuals more or less have this need (like the need to eat and sleep), and the existence of both religious beliefs and practices are embedded in the process of satisfying this need – and not in the Durkheim's idea of religious practice (even though he spoke more of rituals) being essentially a consequence of sociological factors and becoming rationalized and legitimized in belief (Durkheim 1965 (1912)).

Causal explanation in Praych Doung village relates to Evans-Pritchard's ideas about witchcraft being used by the Zande to explain misfortunes and rare occurrences. Evans-Pritchard writes about why, in the Zande philosophy (or religious belief), a granary collapses onto people who are sitting under it and get injured:

“Zande philosophy can supply the missing link. The Zande knows that the supports were undermined by termites and that people were sitting beneath the granary in order to escape the heat and glare of the sun. But he knows besides why these two events occurred at a precisely similar moment in time and space. It was due to the action of witchcraft. If there had been no witchcraft people would have been sitting under the granary and it would not have fallen on them, or it would have collapsed but the people would not have been sheltering under it at the same time. Witchcraft explains the coincidence of these two happenings.” (1979: 366)

In other words, the Zande had a need for causal explanation, because they answered the question of “why” this misfortune happened. Why two happenings had to happen at the same time resulting in people getting injured. And they explained it by witchcraft. By explaining it by witchcraft, I would argue the Zande had a notion of control in their own lives and in their own safety. Because they knew why a misfortune happens, they also knew how to avoid being injured themselves. That is causality.

Causality gives people psychological and emotional balance, and feelings of safety or hope, as they know (or think they know) how to affect reality and thus how to avoid injuries and other misfortunes. It relates to Malinowski's (1925) idea that religion or religious beliefs and rituals arise from psychological crisis, such as fear of death, and people trying to make interventions through religious rituals in order to survive (both physically and psychologically). When I interviewed a certain Praych DOUNG pig farmer, an uneducated man in his late thirties, he told me that one has to offer sacrifice to the guardian spirits of the land in order to *thwer kar pe-ye khloen* – literally “to do precaution” or “to do preventive action”. This is exactly what Evans-Pritchard was talking about. To control reality in one's own favour through a causal religious belief that misfortune is affected by mean spirits (witchcraft). The Praych DOUNG farmer had been equipped by his surrounding cultural knowledge to explain a misfortune, such as a death of newly born piggies, by *sasna*, and by sacrificing fruit and rice wine to guardian spirits of the land he was merely intervening reality in order to avoid such a misfortune.

When I was in Praych DOUNG village, I often met people who traveled away from Kandal province to another province to find better employment opportunities or to go to live with one's faraway relatives. A few of them took a little bit of dirt from Kandal province to go with them to the new province, as they believed the dirt of one's own home province would give protection against sickness and disease of the unfamiliar province.

In effect, they tried to protect their health, and they believed that this kind of ritual would help. They thought (or, as mentioned before, at least were hopeful that it might work) that in reality this kind of procedure would give protection. They had an understanding that it might work, and so they did it, in an attempt to control one's life – one's health. To think of it, it is actually rather rational to act in this way if one understands it to be an effective way of protection. So, they were trying to protect themselves, like anyone else in the world. Only their efforts were peculiar to their belief and (causal) understanding, and so they differed from, say, a Westerner who might protect oneself by getting a vaccine.

As I have stated earlier, the regular Praych DOUNG villager did resemble Lévi-Strauss' *Bricoleur* in that in his struggle for survival he used whatever religious tradition seemed plausible at the time, or whatever religious tradition popped into his head, without a belief or clear causality between the means and ends – meaning that he was not really sure whether this religious idea would really work or not, but he, like the *bricoleur*, used it to give it a try. By this I am trying to illustrate firstly the poverty and severe social and material conditions of several Praych DOUNG villagers, and secondly how they were prone to believe in any explanation of an easy solution to their problems. This is why they were eager to try any means to satisfy their desperate needs. This is very

believable, because it is easy to understand why, for instance, a poor person without enough food on his/her plate would easily believe any explanation that gave hope for a better tomorrow.

Here I am referring to a similarity of what Lévi-Strauss said about the “savage mind” and how I see the religious context of the Praych DOUNG villagers. I am not, in any way, trying to belittle the Praych DOUNG villagers in non-religious matters. I am simply arguing that, even though the Praych DOUNG villagers were not like the “savage mind” of Lévi-Strauss in building their homes or driving their motorbikes, their religious lives were very much like the notion of using whatever religious idea to make ends meet. This stems from their poverty and from the uneducatedness, which has nothing to do with their intelligence. It is a psychological fact that a human being wants rather to be happy and hopeful than unhappy and hopeless.

This proposition is further encouraged by my findings in the field such as the belief that eating too many fruits causes fever in children, or that sicknesses are religiously transmitted through black magic. These are beliefs that in my opinion are contradictory to empirical data that can be found in nature. Of course eating many fruits increases the risk of eating one bad fruit by coincidence. But this belief was never told to me in this fashion. Nobody seemed to understand that it at least was possible to get sick from eating only one fruit as well. It was all happenstance.

So, the plethora of religious traditions from which to choose from – one obviously wants to choose a religious act as long as one believes that a religious act can have an impact on the material world – in Praych DOUNG village was vast. Besides Buddhism and Buddhist monks, there were the *achar*, the laity ritual leaders and public chanters whom usually were a lot talkative than monks, the *kru khmer*, people specializing in traditional Khmer animism ranging from experts on traditional medicine, amulet-makers, intermediaries between people and spirits, and fortune tellers, the *thmuap*, who were a kind of sorcerer’s or black magicians often associated with scary and bad things, and the *boramey*, which is probably the most ambiguous category of them all with lots of different people who claimed they were in profound connection with spirits, or different kinds of *pro-leung*. From what I gathered in Praych DOUNG village, the Buddhist monks were merely one choice among the pool of different choices from which to lead a religious life.

The best example of this comes from the neighbour of my landlord in Praych DOUNG villager who started raising pigs during my fieldwork. Before actually starting his pig businesses, he consulted a *kru khmer* who predicted when it should be safe to start. When I asked him when he would start, he replied that “in two weeks, because a fortune teller did not give me the permission to start before that”.

One time I saw a “happening” within the premises of one family in Praych DOUNG. There were lots of people gathering around an odd looking tree. There also were three Buddhist

monks chanting. I wandered in and started asking questions about what was happening. The people told me that there is a healing spirit (*boramey*) in the tree and that the owner of the house and the three monks were conducting a ritual in which the owner of the house was trying to secure the services of the *boramey*, so to speak. A fortune teller had told the head of the house that they should offer sacrifices such as fruits, food, rice wine, water, and burn incense sticks. The odd looking tree turned out to be a malformed palm tree, because it had three trunks instead of just one, like normally is the case. My point here is that the Buddhist monks were merely collaborating with an animistic, magico-religious universe rather than competing with or opposing it. Thus, what is important is the way in which people's imaginations, in this case the ability of Buddhist monks to interact with *boramey* or spirits in the Khmer universe and the ability of the *boramey* to heal human beings, create a "reality" in which different religious aspects are in peace, so to speak, and even collaborating with each other. And this "reality" gives the Praych DOUNG villagers causal explanation.

One of the most fundamental questions that always popped into my head when I saw someone resorting to a sorcerer or a fortune teller (*kru khmer*, *kru tiey*), Buddhist monk (*lok sang*), or some elder or *achar*, a sort of ritual orchestrator or mediator, rather than a doctor, medical consultant, or let alone a book or the internet, was why it was so? What was the reason that drove him or her to consult a religious or supernatural explanation rather than a scientific one? Was it belief in religion? Was it belief that when one dreamed about breaking one's tooth, a Buddhist monk at a *wat* was able to interpret that dream with relevance in his or her real life?

What I found out was that there were several reasons. Some people acted in this way because that was what their grandparents and other elders in the village had told them when they were children, that is, to seek help of sorcerers and Buddhist monks. This course of action is heavily influenced by lack of education and thus a lack of propensity to rely on scientific medical explanations, to read books, and to have critical discussions, and also by poverty (no internet) and a culture of transmitting information orally from people close to oneself.

Then again, some people acted in a religious way because it was simply rational. Given the poverty of many villagers in Praych DOUNG combined with the lack of easily accessible (both due to poverty and the fact that there were no "real" hospitals near Praych DOUNG) medical facilities, and given that it has been so in Praych DOUNG for decades due to Cambodia's well-known catastrophic past, the fact that people choose to seek help of a sorcerer or the like not because of they think it is a good option but because they think it is their only option. Villagers in Praych DOUNG did not have money to travel to a hospital, and especially in a urgent medical need they often

were afraid that the only result of going to a hospital was hearing the words “no money, no treatment”.

On yet another occasion during my time in Praych DOUNG I had a discussion with a lady who had, well, of course allegedly had an ability to tell a pregnant woman whether she was going to have boy or a girl by touching stomach, belly-button, and the hips. She told me that there are huge differences in the way the belly is shaped between a male and a female baby. What instantly popped into my mind at that time was the question: “how can you be so sure?”

We discussed this for a while, and I pointed out that for me it would be very important to have scientific proof of whether or not it is possible to really tell the sex of the baby merely by touching the stomach from outside. By scientific I meant (and mean) some kind of researched knowledge through empirical observations and experimentation so that this “hypothesis” could be verified. However, the Khmer lady in question was insistent on her ability. For her, there was no hypothesis. There was no process of verifying a truth. She did not need proof for her understanding. From here it’s merely obvious that a religious counterforce is needed in order to account for the times when she got her prediction wrong. Indeed, when I told her, as discreetly as I could, to try her ability for ten times and see how many times she can get it correct, she stated that there can be something strange that distorts her conclusion.

To conclude this chapter it would suffice to say that religion is most importantly a tool for causal explanation, in the sense that it provides a framework of explanatory force to fulfill the basic human need to understand. It does not matter whether a Praych DOUNG villager believes (they often used the word carry or hold rather than believe) in Buddhism or any other religion for that matter, because they merely habitualize their religiousness through learned ideas and causalities in their childhoods. *Sasna* for the Praych DOUNG villagers is first and foremost a mode for reality. The examples I have discussed above show this very vividly.

2.6 Religion as a Model for Selfhood

In this sub-chapter I will discuss the concept of religion as a model for selfhood and how it may or may not be observable in Praych DOUNG. This refers to how I saw religion in Praych DOUNG as a model for individual behaviour, belief, and causal explanation very much like science, medicine, or technology serve models for individual behaviour in my own culture. Further I am analyzing the way this influences socio-cultural change.

The Praych DOUNG villagers, who have little interest in ultimate origins or systematic theology, are most fundamentally interested in their own lives and in how religion may or may not interact with them. The culturally constructed moral symbols according to which the villagers estimate their lives and actions are, therefore, observable in the myriad rules that govern everyday life and the details of different kinds of religious activities. How far individuals are willing to go (and in what kind of contexts) in order to solve personal problems, and what kind of behaviour is legitimate in pursuing one's goals? These questions were on my mind when I was conducting my research in Praych DOUNG.

The theme of religion as a model for selfhood is relevant concerning morality and social development due to some very enlightening insights on the importance of the concept of culture argued by Roger Keesing in his book "Kwaio Religion" (1992 [1982]). He states that there are two different views on culture, namely culture as a generalization from or characterization of cognitive worlds of individuals and culture as situated in the community as a public and shared symbolic system, that are equally important in doing anthropological research (ibid. 245 - 246).

Religion as a model for selfhood is important as the first of these. Religious morals and supramorals guide Praych DOUNG villagers' lives in such ways that any individual in the community has to know of them in order to be able to participate in the morally ordered social life. Even though every individual has slightly different perspective on religion and religious morality, some believing in Buddhism and some believing in no religion at all, they nonetheless have to have an understanding of what is going on generally at the village in order to make sense of their lives as they live them in relation to other people. If an individual would not comprehend the culturally conventional ideas of morality (be it religious or non-religious), he or she would be deemed a stranger, someone outside of the social life.

Indeed, even though I observed that Praych DOUNG villagers exercise a variety of different religious activities in different degrees, they still had some interesting things in common. These things in common had all something to do with the readiness of receptiveness towards religious knowledge and understanding. They all drew from the same symbolic resources, be it for their own distinctive and unique benefit

For instance, when a young woman tried desperately to get rid of her violent husband (whom she had been forced to marry by her mother) in the village, she was not really interested in how but in when. Her discourse was always revolving on that same topic. She sought religious help from monks at the village pagoda trying in different ways to answer her own question. She would try to get the monks predict when she could be able to divorce her husband, and she would *joal bon*, to join different Buddhist and animistic ceremonies that were occurring in the village in search of

good luck and better tomorrow. For her, the symbolic resources, such as different religious ceremonies, the Buddhist notion of making merit or joining other people's merit, or the ability of Buddhist monks to foresee things, were not necessarily of metaphysical or even cultural interest but merely of personal interest. It is only, like Keesing argues, through situating the symbolic and shared religious structures in people's everyday lives and experiences (as alternatives for meaningful and bearable lives) that the idea of religious morality can be plausible for people's lives and, as individuals constitute collectives, for socio-cultural change. What comes inevitably clear here is that socio-cultural change, according to the aforementioned logic, should not merely be a lineal direction from worse to better but rather a meaningful and bearable, indeed, a pleasant change in the relation between the symbolic meanings of the surrounding culture and the material conditions of life.

The data on religious activity from Praych Doung clearly shows that whatever people do, be it pig farming, treating sickness, defending one's children, planning on one's future, or trying to establish oneself in a social context, they always resort to an outside power, which often is a religious other such as a guardian spirit of the village or a belief in a Khmer medicine that has no empiric evidence as opposed to resorting to oneself or the other people around. This is convergent with the patron-client relationships that are so often talked in the Cambodian context and that are sometimes related to Buddhism, for instance by Christine J. Nissen (Nissen, 2008). In the classic patron-client relations, the client resorts to the patron in a way that defines the two parties as unequal. Also, the patron is accepted to be more powerful than the client, from which follows that the client can sometimes benefit from the relation and sometimes not. And when s/he cannot benefit from the relationship, there is nothing s/he can do to change that. This creates obedience and passivity.

On an individual level, as a model for selfhood, religion and religious views (the tendency to give things meanings and causality through religious or unempirically established understandings) had a strong influence on moral perspectives. This was particularly true in the area of proscriptions. One certainly intriguing proscription was for a young man and a woman not to stay uninvolved with each other if they had been together once. I found out that several marriages in Praych Doung had started in this way. Many young adults had had sexual relations once or twice without a condom, and if there was a child (as evidence) they had to get married. This proscription was not of a very formal nature but of very social one. When I asked around about this phenomenon, all of the villagers told me that premarital sexuality is very disgraceful and that if someone gets pregnant in a premarital intercourse they would be too ashamed not to get married. The religious background here was that whenever this happened, the villagers told me, the ancestral

spirits of the people involved, the *lok ta* spirits of the house and land, the guardian spirit of the village itself and so forth, would not tolerate it.

That was a clear-cut example of a religious supra-moral. A violation of such a moral code would not necessarily have generated strong feelings of guilt, but rather feelings of shame and inadequacy because one was not able to abide to the social norm. And it was not directly derived from Buddhist ethos but rather from the religious mind-set of Praych Doung villagers – from the fact that Praych Doung villagers had a tendency to believe “whatever was at hand” in order to sustain them both socially and psychologically.

The same goes with resorting to animistic beliefs and religion in the great struggle to survive in the world. It can never be guaranteed that the great religious other, in the form of a Buddhist monk or an animistic guardian spirit of the village, will or can help you, and that’s what makes it so resembling of the political sphere of patron-client relations. It also affects the sets of moral guidelines that the people who resort to the religious other (or sometimes vaguely otherness, as is implied in situations when people are afraid of something more powerful than they are, but cannot quite put their finger on what it specifically is), because I observed that the Praych Doung villagers, for one, lived in a kind of reciprocity with the divine. The morality of them came from their ancestors, or the spirits of their ancestors, in a kind of performative way (as I have stated earlier) through human emotions such as fear of the spirits or hope that someday the spirits would help them. The spirits were believed to be powerful beings which inhabited the spiritual realm, and people seemed to live in reciprocal relations with them. Consequently, if the spirits and other magico-religious forces sometimes helped and sometimes did not, then, because the spirits were omnipotent (meaning it was up to them whether they helped or not), the villagers used the moral guidelines set by the more powerful beings and spirits as their own moralism.

The indifference of the Praych Doung villagers (and the fact that it was morally right to be indifferent) stemmed from religion being a model for selfhood. I personally witnessed several occasions when a Praych Doung villager promised something to another villager but did not deliver. In Western cultures, this kind of behaviour is mostly unacceptable. But the reason it was acceptable, even promoted to some extent in Praych Doung, perhaps lies in the fact that the omnipotent religious other, the role model setting moral guidelines, did not always deliver either.

Theoretically, then, people’s social activity was heavily influenced by their religious beliefs. Further, socio-cultural change, or development, should be seen from this perspective as well, because what people think “should be” is often reflected in what they want for themselves. If religion plays a role in how people see themselves, then it also plays a role in how socio-cultural change could be shaped.

In conclusion, people's individual morality can be maintained through religious beliefs, activities, and festivities. This occurs through various settings but can be predominantly divided into two categories: 1) fear of a supreme being, such as *lok ta* or a *kmaoich*, that makes people to more fully follow moral principles, and in this case people usually follow such moral principles that the supreme beings are believed to endorse, 2) feel of obligation, emotion or "experiencing a weigh lifted off their shoulders" that derives from a successfully followed moral order. Yet another example in Praych Doung was a girl in her twenties who told me:

"I go to the pagoda every once in a while to give offerings to the monks. I wonder why we do it, but I do not know whom to ask. I somehow feel sorry if I do not do it."

3. Social Functions of Religious Behaviour

In Chapter 3 I will analyse social functions of religious behaviour, and more precisely the question of is there any social functions of religious behaviour in Praych DOUNG. I have previously stated that religion as a model for reality acts essentially on the individual level in Praych DOUNG village, but this thesis would not be whole without a discussion of the social level as well. There are indeed a few social functions of religious behaviour that I observed in Praych DOUNG. However, these are not so much related to the classic ideas of anthropology, such as religion maintaining the social equilibrium or social cohesion (how religion might keep the society up and running), but more to the ways in which religion guides social hierarchies and social relations.

3.1 Classic Social Functions of Religion in Anthropology

The classic social functions of religion in anthropology include the following: 1) it sets moral guidelines for social virtues and norms, making religion a model for social viability, 2) it promotes social cohesion through shared rituals and symbolization (Emile Durkheim, 1912), 3) it is used as political means to control the communities and societies, and 4) it influences the economic behaviour of people (as in the famous argument by Max Weber about the connection between the Protestant Ethic and the development, and success in my opinion, of capitalism)(Weber, 1905).

I will come to the first function later. For now, let's focus on the three latter functions. The second one has been very popular in defining religion throughout anthropology in small-scale villages that experience animistic and deeply profound religions phenomena, and which have been left rather untouched by global forces. In Praych DOUNG village, *sasna* does indeed bring about social cohesion in many ways. People build Buddhist monasteries and other religious temples and spirit houses together, and they attend the same Buddhist ceremonies such as the Khmer New Year and the Pchum Ben in September. They understand each other within the religious context of the rituals, meaning that they understand when other talk about what to wear for the Khmer New Year, or when someone feels a bit sad for not being able to travel to the *wat* of one's deceased parents during the Pchum Ben. In a word, *sasna* promotes social cohesion in Praych DOUNG village in the sense that *sasna* is shared and universal – everyone knows that the others experience *sasna* as well, even though different individuals might experience it differently.

The important question one needs to ask here is that “would there be similar social cohesion even without *sasna*”? I would argue that there would. Even without religion, the Praych DOUNG villagers would still have some level of social cohesion due to Khmer language, for instance, which enables people to communicate with each other. It is language, I believe, that is a lot stronger “glue” that holds the village together. And it is only after people share the same language that they can come up to terms with each other and create ceremonies and understanding towards one another. *Sasna* is obviously part of the glue here, but it is secondary, and not primary, like language is.

Until now I have talked very little about the politics in the Praych DOUNG village. There is a village chief in Praych DOUNG, who deals with several problems in the village and reconciles arguments between villagers. The village chief answers to the chief of the district, who in turn answers to the chief of the province, who in turn answers to the political elite in Phnom Penh in a corrupt pyramid in which money and reverence flow upward and orders flow downward. Buddhism is indeed used in Cambodia as a means of doing politics, such as building religious infrastructure (Buddhist monasteries, roads leading to Buddhist monasteries, sculpture, huge religious monuments, and so on) for the hearts (and no doubt votes) of the local populace. This shows that the local villagers, at the grass-roots if you will, do place a value in religious infrastructure. However, when it comes to the Praych DOUNG village, there were two Buddhist monasteries which were both funded by overseas Khmer and not so much by the political elite. Obviously the village chief and even the district chief had made generous donations for the building of the *wats* in an effort to win people to their sides. But as this thesis does not really focus on politics, I will conclude that the political level from the perspective of everyday problems of the villagers was not relevant. As I focus on the everyday problems of the Praych DOUNG villagers, it should be noted that these problems occur within a given political context, which is always unchangeable at the time, especially for the Praych DOUNG villagers who were not politically interested at all¹³.

When it comes to the fourth function of religion, that of religion influencing economic behaviour, I have one great example I witnessed in Praych DOUNG. There was one family in Praych DOUNG living in three generations in a single home: a grandmother, husband and wife, and their five children. They were living in a nice house by a dirt road, with a nice 10x50m² piece of land behind the house. They had mango trees and banana trees there, and they grew rice at the back. By Praych

¹³ Whenever I tried to talk about politics and the ruling CPP party in Praych DOUNG, no one showed any great interest in stating anything besides “well, that is politics, let’s not talk about that”.

Doung standards, they were well off. One day the grandmother died, and they wanted to prepare a proper Cambodian funeral so that the grandmother's soul would not be in distress and that it could easily leave its body. Unfortunately, the family had been living from hand to mouth and had no extra to pay for the funeral. And, to my great surprise, the family decided to sell their house and the land with it in order to hold a proper religious ceremony for the grandmother's soul. After that, they became very poor as they had swapped their old big house and nice piece of land into a small house with no land at all. Suddenly they had severe difficulties to feed their five children. There was a direct consequence of religion on people's economic situation and, thus, on their well-being. Religion generated poverty in this way for this particular family.

However, this example belongs more to the individual level rather than to the social level, as even if this affected the social economy in the sense that there was someone else better off who bought the house and got a new nice piece of land, the religious reasons for this behaviour were completely on the individual level – be it on a level of an individual family rather than an individual person. It was the individual family who faced a problem – how to sustain their grandmother's soul – and it was the individual family who “used” religion in order to solve it.

In the following, I will focus on the first function: religion setting moral guidelines for social virtues and norms. This is because I think the most relevant context of the relation between religion and social life is the context of morality. In a word, I will focus on religious morality and the way in which it yields social viability. I argue that this is the single most important social function of religion, or *sasna* in Prayh Doung village.

I ask the question: is morality important from a religious perspective? *Sasna* does not clearly define what is right and what is wrong in Prayh Doung, but it certainly creates a certain kind of moral basis from which to assess the world and other people. Also, *sasna* and different religious rituals help Prayh Doung villagers to define themselves in relation to others. It also helps them, as I witnessed on several occasions, to create a superior image of themselves so that one sets new standards and does not lose one's face. As I focus on moral matters in this chapter, I will start with a short discussion of Buddhism and corruption in Cambodia in general.

3.2 Buddhism and Corruption

Cambodian society is overwhelmingly based on honour and prestige, which are increasingly derived from fame and wealth just like in any other modern country in the world. In the modern globalized world of commercial and consumerist interests, it is no surprise that Cambodians have jumped on the same bandwagon, be it lagging behind in time. Given that Cambodian society is enormously corrupted, the pursuit for wealth and status is often regarded as transcending any morally derived behavioural codes. It seems, indeed, that the idea of end justifying the means is a highly utilized one in Cambodia.

As such, the Cambodian cultural context is one which allows superficial protection of cultural transgressors of morally derived ideas on what is acceptable and respectable in society. Just like Christine J. Nissen noted in her article “Buddhism and Corruption” (Nissen 2008), Cambodians are rarely ready for self-criticism and self-assessment. Nissen argued that Cambodians despise of corruption and corrupted practices, which they think are widespread in Cambodia, but when their own actions are clearly corrupted, they refuse to accept that it is so. She says that people strategically use their vocabulary and explanations of corruption to legitimize their own involvement in corrupt practices. Such is the difference between a bribe, or *luy som-nouk*, a corrupted and culturally unaccepted deed, and a sincere offering or a gift, *sakun*, given to someone in order to get future benefits and, as is often said, “good luck”. *Luy sakun* is money given out of gratefulness for a service received, which highlights the social acceptability of *luy sakun*. Nissen further argues that Cambodians do this according to a kind of Buddhist logic.

Nissen argues:

“Buddhist beliefs rest upon the idea of a hierarchical order that is dependent on moral habitus. The better karma one has, the higher rank on the ladder and the better life one will get. Since it is held that all rich are corrupt but that corruption will be punished by loss of merit, it makes sense for people to label their own practices as not corrupt” (2008, 285).

From her discussion it seems that the logic is this: in the Buddhist ideology, in order to be rich and wealthy one needs good karma, which can be acquired through virtuous deeds and making merit; and in the real world, in order to be rich and wealthy one needs to be corrupt. Now these two spheres are in severe opposition, as the third idea is that corruption will be punished by loss of merit. The first sphere is the realm of religious morality, and the second sphere is the realm

of material morality as a sort of zero-sum game. (A great country slogan in Cambodia could be: “Be corrupt or be dead”.) One of the important notes one has to make here is that the Buddhist logic referred to here by Nissen actually says that merit-making in this life affects one’s status, happiness, and psyche in the next existence. This is the great Buddhist reincarnational cycle.

Nissen goes on to say that “*the personal justification that takes place in the moral economy of corruption... is a reproduction of the basic Buddhist logic by which people rationalize their own behaviour through reference to their lack of power and, therefore their lack of responsibility*” (Nissen 2008, 286). This is a lot more relevant argument. The Buddhist logic earlier would mean that Cambodians are sacrificing their next life in order to have lots of money (or, perhaps more correctly, more money than they would have were they not corrupted) in this life. I find the hierarchical world of Buddhism – in which even the monks have a strict hierarchy – has influence on people through its association of power and patron-client relations. It is quite precise to say that unless corruption is tackled at the very top, it seems very unlikely that it will ever be stamped out. If the patron practices corruption, why should not the client do the same? In a fundamentally unequal society, in which for example an older person should be respected by a younger person automatically and without questioning with no regard to the characters of the people involved (which is a sort of age racism), this kind of indifferent and superficial orientation towards corruption is embedded deep in the minds of the Cambodian people. The fact that corruptive practices are embedded deep in the Khmer culture as a habitual and common-sensical force reflects the fact that since Cambodia passed the long-awaited anti-corruption law in 2010 there has been little change in the everyday life of the grass-roots level in both accepting and giving bribes even though a few high-ranking figures have been arrested.

The connection between merit-making and morality is that, since merit-making is something that is good, whatever yields merit is straightforwardly a moral deed. In other words, whatever is morally accepted is merit-making. But why is corruption immoral? Is it really immoral in Cambodia? I would argue that this is merely a Western misconception of Cambodians and Buddhism. To me it seems clear that if Cambodians do not accept to be corrupted while they certainly are, in other words they refuse to be guilty of it: then it is a moral deed, something that one does not have to feel guilty about.

Nissen clearly shows how corruption is not socially accepted in Cambodia. In other words this means that corruption is immoral; it is against the Cambodian notion of *sal-la-thoa*, or

morality. What is evident here is that Cambodian culture, while placing great importance on upholding culturally constructed ideals of behaviour, yet simultaneously tolerates misbehaviour rather well. Or to put it more clearly, it does not tolerate misbehaviour per se, but the fruits and benefits that come with misbehaviour, be it through corruption, crime, sex work (there's been lots of recent work on prostitution in Cambodia, and how they should be named "professional girlfriends" because they are not victims or bad girls), or political threatening. And thus my earlier argument that "the end justifies the means" is the framework through which many Cambodians judge their own and their peers' behaviour. Thus, I would also argue that, unlike Nissen states, corruption is socially accepted in Cambodia.

The simple logic seems to be that majority of the contemporary Cambodians are materialists who place great value on money and material wealth. If so, then, the religious aspect of goodness, for example the Buddhist idea of merit-making and what I would like to call merit-gaining (because who does good gains good), is acted out in having money and having lots of wealth. This is because, so the logic says, Cambodians believe that good things come to good people. And if money is seen as a "good thing", then whoever has lots it must have been a great person before (and probably now as well). So, in conclusion, money and material wealth relate to goodness through a rather perverse religious logic in Cambodia.

On the other hand, we have got theories, like that of Nissen, in which the moral economy of Cambodia is accounted for through Buddhism, and on the other we have got the idea that the moral order in Cambodia is inclined to allow anything in order for the transgressor to avoid blame, guilt, and embarrassment, to name a few – emotions that can be associated with, according to Joel J. Kupperman (1999), religious supramorals – but more on him later.

This could be a social psychological thing. The poverty and difficult life of many Cambodians are more and more increasingly put adjacent with globally transmitted ideas of Western happiness and material abundance to such an extent that they have started to experience what could be called a massive socially manifested form of the Stockholm syndrome. Their lack of education and experience in a globalized world creates so strange and confusing amalgam that it is not only easy but also necessary to dispose of their traditional values so that they have started to accept corruption and live according to it.

In conclusion to this subchapter, let it suffice to assert that even though the traditional Buddhist philosophy, in its more or less orthodox sense, does permeate the cultural consciousness of some Cambodians, it is best viewed as a separate structural, often political, component of the

Cambodian psyche. Buddhism is not taught formally at Cambodian schools¹⁴, but is merely habitually adopted by the people. It is interpreted and adhered to differently in different times and places and by different individuals.

3.3 Religious Behaviour and Morality in Praych Doung Village

I have established a kind of “bigger picture” of how ambivalent moral norms can be in Cambodia. Now let us turn to the Praych Doung village, *sasna*, and people’s religious lives in Praych Doung village. The main idea is that there is an infinite number of different religious symbols, tangible and intangible, which convey norms and values (which, in turn, convey morality). Also, these norms and values are very ambivalent in nature because they create what I would call inevitable contradictions. In fact, all cultural norms and values are often contradictory with other norms and values.

Penny Edwards (2008) explores the patterns framing the perception of morality in Cambodian culture and contemporary society. She gives some rather intriguing insights of the interplay between cultural understandings of morality and political expectations, on the part of both the ones ruling and the ones being ruled. She states that “morality is in and of itself a performance art” (ibid. 233). She emphasizes discursive patterns saying that the debates on sexual morality among Cambodians in the public sphere may reflect more than mere strategizing and legitimacy-building. She makes a clear-cut connection between morality and politics, inseparable from one another. By performance here is meant the use of morality for one’s own purposes. This is an aspect that is relevant in a modern-day-Cambodia because the modern influences, such as free market influences and other Westernizing cultural factors, are presenting Cambodians with increasing selection dilemmas of economic purposes. Indeed, Cambodia suffers all the time from families being evicted from their homes or from their lands for the purpose of building infrastructure for the rich – such as building supermarkets, airports, golf-courses, fancy apartments and hotels, and getting land for growing cash-crops, to name a few.

This is relevant from the point of view of my study in the Praych Doung village as well because politics go along with morality in shaping local-level modernity. From a religious perspective, it means that people have to deal with issues that are contradictory, such as learning

¹⁴ There might be some schools obviously, that teach Buddhist pragmatics, but certainly not many. In Praych Doung village, Buddhism was not taught at either public or private schools.

how to deal with one's financial problems while still wanting to adhere to religious beliefs (which I have illustrated above).

For example, Charles Keys asserts that the misrecognition of the characteristics of Khmer society by the Communist Party of Kampuchea during the communist revolution in the 70s was the key in the failure of CPK to represent successfully the Cambodian rural peasant population. He argues that this misrecognition was about the economy of the rural society (even today the population of Cambodia is overwhelmingly rural), that is, about the idea that rural Khmer villagers understand their economic and political situation in moral terms derived fundamentally from Theravada Buddhism. Keys highlights the moral economy of rural Cambodians, or, to put it more explicitly, the interplay between moral beliefs and economic activities, and that it should be taken into consideration in trying to grasp the connection between modern developmental context and a morality stemming from religion.

I agree with Keys, only I would like to add that the moral terms are not derived from Theravada Buddhism per se but also from the mixture of local-level beliefs and the Khmer animistic spirit-system. This is the main finding of my study: religion and moral order are married in Praych DOUNG village through a moral economy in which new ideas and values are not taken for granted but rather are forced to comply with locally shaped religious norms, values, and beliefs.

I have now established that *sasna* in Praych DOUNG village has a huge role in people's lives and that it has a great impact on social and cultural matters in Cambodia. It is embedded in the everyday assumptions and people's basic objectives in life. For the average Praych DOUNG villager, *sasna* is heavily invested in the making, understanding, and accepting the world and one's endeavour to establish oneself in it.

Next, I will discuss how *sasna* and moral order are related among the Praych DOUNG villagers. Understanding how the Praych DOUNG villagers act according to their religious beliefs, ideas, and emotions is not to be separated from their moral lives and, as such, their expectations and desires towards socio-cultural change. This is because the fundamental and pervasive religious dispositions of the Praych DOUNG villagers guide the way in which people see themselves as parts of a social whole as well as within their individual lives, solving their everyday problems and trying to reach peace of mind.

The Buddhist notion of merit-making pretty straightforwardly promotes certain kind of behaviour inasmuch it encourages people to act in ways that yield merit, or *bon*. Thus it serves as a clear moral guideline: do all the things that yield merit and avoid all the things that yield the opposite, the *baab*. But, in addition, the more vague and ambivalent animistic ideas – traditional

healers, traditional medicine, even Buddhist monks providing “superstitious”¹⁵ services, several supernatural beliefs outside the realm of Buddhism, belief in natural spirits living in distinctive objects of nature, such as large stones or odd palm trees – belong to the realm of moral order. The nexus with the animism, though, is different from the one in the case of Buddhism or merit-making. The nexus between animistic belief and morality is that these animistic beliefs serve to create the cultural background, the values different things or actions have and where desirable actions stem from, as conceptualizations of social life or individual problems in the wider, modern society.

The direction that modernity takes Praych DOUNG village, for instance, is often contradictory with traditional values that derive from a religiously influenced culture. Economic changes were discernible from the traditional perspective: people wanted to have money. But money was needed in order to provide even bigger ceremonies for ancestral spirits, or in order to contribute more to one’s grandparents’ annual memorials, and the like. Several Praych DOUNG villagers complained to me that in the earlier days, *kaal bpe-mun*, one could borrow some rice from one’s neighbours more unconditionally and more freely than now, which obviously presents a community in which the pressure to survive and to be successful is increasingly on the individual. This, for instance, might be contradictory to traditional values of what is accepted and respected in society, community, or even within the family. A Western emphasis on the individual and his success on his own, one might think, is surely a devastating factor in a cultural setting which demonstrates a strong sense of religious community which is manifested in doing good and helping others through religious beliefs (such as Buddhist monks giving advice to people who have had bad dreams, or protecting one’s family with a supernatural amulet, or sacrificing one’s land in order to help one’s mother’s spirit who has recently passed away).

The basis for the relation between religion and morality, as perceived in this thesis, then, is not inherent in religion providing prescriptions (although clearly defined doctrinal religions have a tendency to do so, and Buddhism surely does so) but in how religious beliefs, ideas, practices, and emotions both present and represent desires and needs that further reflect people’s understanding of what is good and what is bad.

Also, when one thinks of the nexus between morality and religion, it is useful to analyse the notion of causal explanation. By causal explanation I mean anyone’s subjective knowledge, the perception of how different things are causally connected to each other. It refers to how people perceive of causality and how people understand the relationship between cause and effect with regard to the real world and their real lives in it. This cause-effect relation easily

¹⁵ It is very common for Khmer monks to practice non-Buddhist activities, such as fortune-telling, foreseeing the future, designing and making protective amulets (boar tusks, for instance) that can protect its owner from even a bullet – or so they say – and holding Buddhist ceremonies that are not strictly Buddhist in nature.

translates into means-ends relation, because the success of a given mean in reaching a given end means that there is causality between the two – the mean causes an effect, which in the successful means-ends dialectic is the same than the desired end. The means-ends dialectic turns the causal explanation of people into a convenient way of reaching one's goals and desires, which in turn yields a very important conclusion: *sasna*, as understood as a model for reality, is related to moral order inasmuch it serves as a means to reach a certain desired end – for example, whatever is perceived to be positive socio-cultural change, and thus development.

Logic, as a presumption-conclusion relation, is perhaps a bit more plausible concept to analyse here, as in the Praych DOUNG villagers do what they perceive as logical: they conduct action that is in accordance with their conclusions, and that action is then perceived as causality, because they obviously believe their conclusions to be correct in the given presumption (religious) context. So, to put it in the language of this thesis, the Praych DOUNG villagers act causally within the context of their presumption-conclusion universe, which is heavily influenced by *sasna*, and thus they are acting morally (justly, decently, properly) as well, because in that logic conclusions are made about morality as well. In any given culture, then, what is logical is also very much just, decent, and proper. This is because, logically, if something is presumed, such as starting a piggery on a Tuesday being potentially catastrophic, it is widely understood and accepted that one does not start a piggery on Tuesday.

Indeed, I lived close to a man in Praych DOUNG village who started to raise pigs during my visit. And he was told by a local spiritual “professional”, a *kru khmer*, that he should not buy new sows on a Tuesday. I then went on and asked his wife about what she or the other neighbours would think if he broke the suggestion of the *kru khmer* and bought the sows on a Tuesday. She told me that she and probably the other neighbours as well would think of him as being too hasty and too careless and indifferent about the *kru khmer*'s advice. She even told me that disregarding the advice of *kru khmer* would be stupid. If he bought the sows on a Tuesday, then, he would have been less respected, and less valued on moral terms as well.

It is in this way that *sasna* in Praych DOUNG village, as a logical and rational type of behaviour (as it is commonly regarded as such), is related to morality and, through morality, to social harmony and social cohesion. Transgressions of religious values could, at worst, create social unrest and insecurity.

I think it should be clarified here what I mean by religious morality. For the reader, what might easily come first to mind might be the Ten Commandments of Christianity, or the Sharia Law of Islam. I am not, however, talking about such prescriptions that a given clear-cut and dogmatic religion might give. I am talking about how different religious acts or beliefs towards other people (or, as it turned out, even already deceased people) are respected and accepted, and how they are thus creating the local social landscape. I am talking about more mercurial and indeterminate values that religiously living individuals might propose – things that might divide people's opinions on a world-wide scale, which would effectively make them cultural-specific or individual-specific aspects.

For the purposes of the next few chapters, Penny Edwards's reading on the moral geology in Cambodia provides also a useful starting point for the understanding of the religious ways in which what is acceptable and respectable in society or community is shaped and evolved. Giving the Buddhist connection with morality a pass, namely following Buddhist precepts of not to kill, not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to lie, and not to use intoxicants, because these are way too ambiguous (for instance, a lie in Cambodia, indeed, everywhere, is not a straightforward concept, and there can be contexts in which lying is actually valued, e.g. white lies in the West), I will focus on the significant standard of moral conduct delineated from the animistic Khmer traditional beliefs that have nothing to do with Buddhism.

For Edwards, the most notable of these is the ancestor worship. She writes: "*A moral geology links current generations to the standard of ancestral behaviour: here, ancestors become moral arbitrators, and represent a mythical standard of morality against which contemporary generations can be judged by current elders*" (Edwards 2008, 219). She also notes the superior authorial force of different animistic spirits, such as *neak ta*, who have various and often loosely defined characteristics and whom serve as a kind of general moral projection reflecting the complex and difficult lives of Cambodians (e.g. 219-220). This was, as we have seen so far, especially true in Praych DOUNG village as well.

In addition to the ancestral spirits and the other magico-religious spirits being moral arbitrators, religious morality is manifested in the moral notes on what is acceptable and respectable in Praych DOUNG village. I am not arguing that the whole of moral sphere of Praych DOUNG villagers stemmed from religion or religious phenomena, but a rather large part of it did. And, as anthropology is aiming to be highly comparative, it is in comparison with several Western cultures that the Praych DOUNG village was peculiar with its religious morality. Too many Praych DOUNG villagers gave acceptability for different things through the religious sphere for this claim to be ignored. As an example, several Praych DOUNG villagers accepted that a husband may demand

money from his wife if she wants a divorce on the grounds of ingratiating several spirits (ancestral spirits of the married couple or guardian spirits of the village) that might get mad.

When Judy Ledgerwood discussed religious morality in Cambodia in Alexandra Kent's and David Chandler's *"People of Virtue – Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Moral Order in Cambodia Today"* (Ledgerwood 2008), she noted the ideas of the Cambodian elders who said that *"what is different today... is the morality of the people, their inability to live according to the tenets of Buddhism"* (Ledgerwood 2008: 147). Ledgerwood conducted her fieldwork in Kandal province like I did, too, and her insights should be comparable with mine. For Ledgerwood, religious morality means merely, in the case of Cambodia, the Buddhist notion of *chbap*, or the Buddhist norms and codes of behaviour, even Buddhist laws if you will. It is evident that she treats religious morality in respect to these norms and codes so that it is wrong not to live according to them, and in turn right to adhere to them. This is, of course, one way of perceiving things, but I think this way of seeing religious morality is a kind of simplification or reductionism. Indeed, as I have stated earlier, my emphasis is more on the animistic, the domain of magic, if you will, than just on Buddhism, as I believe the domain of general supernaturality to be more valid and credible in the case of Praych DOUNG village.

While it is clear that Buddhism has changed in Cambodia due to modern influences, I find it more interesting to analyse the way in which the modern influences have not changed religion in Cambodia but have, like Robbins (2004) writes on the Urapmin, created a new kind of hybrid in which the local and the global, the old and the new, have blended into a new cultural setting.

The most striking force of religion on shared morality is the power that religious symbols, be it Buddhist or Hindu or animistic symbols, have on people. I mean the power of religious symbols of any kind on Khmer people in creating the pool of understandings from which any single individual draws with regard to his or her personal and social life. The basic human needs to understand and do something according to that understanding, be it helping one's sick daughter or trying to live up to one's dreams in a respectable way, is the secret behind religious morality in Cambodia.

The usual Buddhist saying that is often leaned on in discussions of the links between religion and morality in Cambodia is: "do good, receive good, do bad, receive bad" (*thwer bon, ban bon, thwer bap, ban bap*) (Hinton 2008, 77). But this hardly accounts for the most complex ways in

which the everyday life dilemmas and situations shape people's social understandings of what is good and what is bad. Cultural consensus among the Praych Doung villagers, for instance, as a kind of tacit consensus, was of great importance in determining what actions are justified in what contexts.

I suggest, then, that in discussing the religious morality in Cambodia one should treat it in a similar manner than Joel Robbins treated magical practices (*serap*) among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea (Robbins 2004). As mentioned in the quote above, Robbins treats the moral domain as a conscious one, meaning that transgressors of moral order can only be attained when they have acted consciously. Morality refers to something that people do consciously. A wrongdoing is not a wrongdoing if it is not done intentionally. This conscious aspect of morality thus renders it a powerful force in setting the boundaries for what people think about and how they conceive of cultural and socio-cultural change.

Robbins sites an example of magical practice, conducting rituals to ensure good hunting and gardening, which has been condemned by a new cultural influence, Christianity. Robbins discovered that as a consequence of Christianity, people started praying for God instead of conducting traditional rituals in order to ensure good hunting and good gardening. This was a case “in which Christian practices have been neatly slotted into traditional categories, along the lines suggested by the models of assimilation and transformation” (Robbins 2004: 317). Further, the magical practices the Urapmin pursued were quite self-interested. Robbins noticed that some people still used magic, even though in secret, because now it was forbidden, at least in some sense.

This is an example of cultural hybridization. But it is a kind of hybridization in which the “traditional categories” have not been transformed, developed, or changed, but rather have merely been replaced by another kind of substance. From Robbins' argumentation it is clear that the Urapmin have adapted Christianity to fit their particular cultural needs. This is, in itself, a possible shortcoming of all developmental action which transcends cultural boundaries, because as long as development is defined morally, its consequences and success in defined morally as well. In addition, all cultures should have their own right to define their own needs, which can later be satisfied in a morally accepted way. According to Robbins, attending to the conscious moral domain can advance our understanding of cultural change. This is because morality as a conscious domain, as argued above, renders the moral torment of being overwhelmed by trying to live up to two different sets of values a very conscious one. In other words, when people make conscious choices knowing what is morally expected from them, they also recognize the consequences of their actions more clearly and perhaps more vigorously. Two different cultures or sets of moral guidelines or values are bound to be felt as contradictory, at least when they are not complementary.

The beliefs and religious habits I found in Praych DOUNG village, such as people conducting rituals for better health or avoiding inquiries regarding their age due to religious reasons, is interesting in this regard because such things are not easily changed. By this I mean that such things run pretty deep. And were they easily changed, they would easily elicit problems that need working out rather than as ones that can be safely ignored. This is simply because the animistic beliefs of the Praych DOUNG villagers were essentially related to quite important and critical issues of human life, such as health, fear of death or harm, independence, one's status in the community (in which one lives every single day of his or her life), and the like. As long as these things are perceived as being moral issues, and as such conscious issues, related to both choice and freedom, they are likely to create rather stressful problems for people's mental well-being. It would seem that dealing with such issues, for instance telling a Khmer villager not to organize a third or a fourth funeral for his or her dead relative, parent or child in order to save some money for food or future subsistence, one would enter a moral domain that could stir up dangerous consequences.

When such issues infiltrate people's feelings, they become very strong and very dangerous. People might get afraid of shamans casting spells on them, or of people causing harm and bad luck through the supernatural. And as human feelings are sometimes difficult to predict and control, the religious morality in this aspect enters the domain of the unknown.

Thus, religious morality in Praych DOUNG village should be seen as both performative and as a kind of tacit knowledge, in that people are performing religious belief, not as consciously learned rules and principles, but as "habitus", feelings, internalized results of cultural experiences. As such it is very strong. The morality stemming from religious peculiarities in Praych DOUNG village, for instance, has not been a push-over in the eyes of modern values and newfound economic opportunities, but in turn it has created (indeed, creates) the cultural hybrids. As a result, people might easily get even more inhibited by wealthy people and more passive in the political arena. People might also more easily start wasting their money on protective religiousness, such as on protective amulets or on spending more money on religious rituals.

In the next chapter I will discuss Joel Kupperman's division of religious morals and religious supramorals. First point is the nature of the moral domain as one that brings change to consciousness, and experiences some devastating force through the power of human mind. That has a clear consequence on the way in which religious people, such as Praych DOUNG villagers, behave themselves individually.

3.4 Kupperman: Morals and Supramorals in Religion

Here I want to take note of Joel Kupperman's discussion on religious "morals" and "supramorals". I am doing this because Kupperman's division between these morals and supramorals reflects my own division between the aforementioned two different levels of interaction between religion and morality.

The point here is that religious "supramorals" are important with regard to socio-cultural change whereas religious "morals" are not, simply because religious morals as Kupperman sees them are likely never going to change and are thus not affecting socio-cultural change or changing sociality. Religious "supramorals" can shape (indeed, as my argument goes, will shape) important aspects of socio-cultural change. This is true because changing "supramorals" are inevitably also changing the possible directions to which socio-cultural change is able to further itself. They open new horizons for a social group to manifest its own social morality and through it the material conditions of its existence.

In his book, *Learning from Asian Philosophy* (1999), Joel Kupperman talks about the nature of religious ethics. According to Kupperman, there are two different realms of morality, one of which is religious ethics and the other a sort of non-religious morality that entails the rules and behavioural codes that make human society possible in its material terms. Both of these realms have moral prescriptions that carry strong appeal to social pressure and, were an individual to misbehave against such a prescription, the transgressor would be culturally deemed to feel guilty. Examples of these moral prescriptions are commandments not to steal or murder, and the like.

What is different in religious ethics in relation to the non-religious normative ethics is the notion of supramorals. Kupperman explains that the supramorals are not as strict rules as the non-religious moral codes and rather than inciting feelings of guilt incite feelings of regret or inadequacy. The religious supramorals prescribe how a person should live his or her life and what kind of desires and dreams are valued in a society.

From Kupperman's discussion it becomes clear that any society needs strong moral codes, such as prescriptions not to murder or steal or use violence, in order to have any viability as a whole, but what really is interesting from an anthropological comparative perspective is the sphere of supramorals, as it is here where the cultural relativity is observable. It is like in a legal contract: what is important is not the agreement but the small print on the conditions that dictate when and where the agreement is applicable. It is immoral to kill a man in any culture, if you allow such a generalization, but what is interesting from an anthropological perspective is in what kind of conditions would killing a man turn to be a moral exception. It is evident even in the United States

that the dropping of the two atom bombs on Japanese soil in 1945 was considered as a moral exception in order to end the war and avoid even more people (US soldiers) dying.

It is precisely within the notion of religious supramorals, in the fine print of moral order, that the model for selfhood and the model for social viability can be seen as dictating and effecting socio-cultural change and thus, social development. This is because development, such as decreased poverty and increased literacy rates, are not yes-or-no moral questions but supramoral ones. What is respected and what is allowed – in terms of people's happiness, feelings of adequacy, or perception of abundance – in a society becomes a lot more essential tool for socio-cultural change simply because the most foundational building stones of social order, such as rules not to kill and steal, will never alter. But how about poverty – when a person stops being poor and starts being rich? When people are literate, what should they read?

Indeed, the emotions related to morality and to the religious morals and supramorals, such as fear, jealousy, anger, hope, happiness, sadness, guilt, embarrassment, and shame, to name a few, were on the surface of religious activity in Praych DOUNG. What I am trying to postulate here is such a morality which, while not necessarily having anything to do with what is right and what is wrong, serves as a definition of what is respectable (generating feelings of proud), acceptable (generating feelings of happiness and adequateness), and what is unacceptable (generating feelings of shame, anger, sadness, embarrassment).

Also, because every individual has a basic need for causal explanation of the world, religion is often invoked in explaining and legitimizing things that are respectable and acceptable. The point of connecting these moral notions with feelings is that emotions have a strong psychological influence on people, especially so in Praych DOUNG village (I found the villagers were somewhat more emotional than Westerners on average¹⁶), and thus people are more than ready to set moral guidelines accordingly. This is done so that a particular moral code or precept at least seems to make sense. It makes sense because it is contextualized in a religious ethos (be it the most unclearly understood ethos in the case of Praych DOUNG) within which it makes sense. Thus people's emotions, their religion, and their morality exist in a triangular reciprocity.

The supramorals are of essence here because they are subject to change, unlike the stricter and clearer prescriptions of not to kill or steal, for instance, things that invoke strong guilt in a community. And here lies the connection between religion (religious morality) and socio-cultural change.

¹⁶ Many of the Praych DOUNG villagers were guilty of being over the top with their emotions. For example, one time I stumbled across a woman whose phone had gotten wet and subsequently broken. She got overwhelmingly upset and stressed about how she was now unable to call her daughter, who was working in a far-away province, that evening as promised. She cried and screamed pretty loudly, and I thought that I, for instance, would also feel a bit sad in her shoes but would easily deal with the situation and try to borrow someone else's phone.

3.5 Religion as a Model for Social Viability

This chapter includes a discussion on religion as a model for morality. Here it should be noticed that, like I have hinted above, morality is essentially social. By this I do not mean that morality is essentially shared by people (which it sometimes inevitably is, most prominently in the moral refusals to kill or steal), and in many instances it truly varies from individual to individual. What I mean, rather, is the fact that morality can only be determined in relation to other people.

Even though one man can approve of stealing and another forbid it, the concept of stealing can only be understood in a social context meaning that one can only steal from another and not from himself. This is obviously a culturally defined concept and it is philosophically possible that there is a culture in which it is immoral to steal from yourself, but it is not so in Cambodia and it is definitely not so within most of the people in the world.

There was a Khmer woman who killed herself in Phnom Penh by jumping off the Japanese bridge (*speun chruy chongvar*) while I was conducting my field research in Cambodia. She killed herself, according to one interpretation of the situation, because she and her family had lost their home in an illegal land grabbing by the Cambodian government at *Bang Kak* lake area in Phnom Penh (which the government has recently leased to a big corporation associated with a ruling Cambodian People's Party lawmaker).

If we think this instant from a moral perspective, it becomes clear that whether it was right or wrong to kill herself from her individual perspective is an absurd question with no morally determinable answer. Instead, the morality of her action can be measured on a social framework of her husband, children, friends, and colleagues, which is to say among the people who lived through the incident to be influenced by the consequences of her actions. Thus, morality becomes sensible and meaningful when an individual is a social individual, which all individuals are. Morality is, then, essentially social.

By this I mean that moral conduct has to be socially accepted in order for it to really be moral. Morality thus has an elemental inter-subjective aspect to it. The point here is that the inter-subjectivity of morality maintains a social system in which people's actions and behaviour are governed through individual feelings and understandings that are derived from socially accepted ideas of what is respectable and acceptable in the social unit. The individual feelings and understandings, derived in turn from the basic human need for causal explanation, are relevant through this logic of inter-subjectivity. The moral code of a social unit, like the one I found in Praych DOUNG, is not an agreement on morality per se but an agreement on what can be agreed.

As I conducted my fieldwork in Praych DOUNG, it became inevitably clear to me that the villagers still understood or oriented their lives in terms of religious symbolism. Concepts like *kun* and *bon* were a kind of symbolism that guided Praych DOUNG villagers' moral conduct. I argue it is largely through religiously defined values of different traditional actions – actions which are attached to these concepts – that the social morality defines its own viability, and, in the process, its own future. It is, further, in the small print, in the nuances of religious beliefs and ideas rather than merely in Buddhist saying “do good, receive good, do bad, receive bad” where the morality and thus the future expectations and desires of people are shaped and created.

How, then, can religion be a model for social viability? I would like to begin to answer that question by citing two stories I witnessed and heard about in Praych DOUNG. The first one concerns a religious ritual I witnessed when one of the elders in a household I had been closely in touch with passed away. In Cambodia, whenever a person dies, the dead body is washed, balsamized and treated in a Buddhist fashion¹⁷ that somewhat varies from family to family. The occasion is always accompanied by an *achar*, a lay leader of religious ceremonies, and sometimes by a number of monks. After a blessing, in which the soul, or *pra-leung*, of the deceased is believed to be set free in the Buddhist universe, the dead body is cremated in a Buddhist monastery or occasionally, like was the case in the incident I saw, on a deserted lawn in a wooden casket (apparently when people are reluctant to pay the money for the monastery).

The symbolism of the dead grandmother's soul being set free into her next existence, indeed, next life, was of overwhelming importance to her children and relatives at Praych DOUNG. This was evident in the fact that the family of the deceased had to sell their land in order to be able to pay for the expenses of a proper ceremony. They told me several times that without a proper ceremony their grandmother's soul will not be able to take the step to her next existence. Thus it was a real belief in such a religious idea that drove the family to sell their land, indeed, to render their lives and especially their grandmother's next life meaningful. Few days later, I caught the family members living in a nearby location in a lot smaller land area. They were building a new house there.

Subsequently I spent lots of time with that family trying to participate in their religious thoughts and ideas and observing their opinions on their dead grandmother. I asked them lots of question trying to elicit reasoning regarding the question of why they had to sell their land in order to hold a proper ceremony. Why it was so important to hold a proper ceremony? I found out that the answer to this question lied in a moral order strongly dictated and controlled by religion.

¹⁷ However, as I have stated earlier in this study, this “Buddhist fashion” is actually a mixture of different locally negotiated religious concepts instead of pure Buddhism.

The readiness of the Praych DOUNG villagers, such as the family in this case, to possess and absorb, indeed, to accept religious beliefs and understandings was overwhelming to me. This is obviously the way of culturally constructed tacit knowledge. In the Cambodian cultural environment, it is common-sensical to carry religious meaningfulness. The explicit force of religion was merely filling a hole in a social context that cannot be empty – mainly a social as well as individual need to understand the world. Individuals have an urge to understand the world, and societies have an urge to compare and discuss such individual understandings.

The answers I got had to do with fear of something being wrong, inadequacy, feeling sorry for the grandmother, feeling sad. These strongly relate to what I discussed in the earlier chapter, mainly that people created their selfhoods through orienting themselves towards such a religious aspect of social life through individual emotions and feelings. The granddaughter of the dead grandmother told me that the family had to conduct a proper ceremony because she felt that they would somehow feel sad if they didn't.

The religious supramorals, discussed above in detail, have plausibility in them precisely because the moral order of religion, or perhaps more specifically the moral order of religion in its supramoral sense, has strong social consequences. This is also true through the religion being a model for selfhood because, after all, we humans tend to learn from each other and value ourselves in comparison to others. The ways of the Praych DOUNG villagers, like in this example, in their everyday form, were not really influenced by clear-cut religious moral codes that would shed a kind of black-and-white moral order on the community but rather in the supramorals that were observable in people's thoughts of regret, sadness, uneasiness, and feelings that something is wrong. Further, these individual feelings in reality are not that individual as they stem from every individual's position towards the social whole – as in a social psychological perspective: I might be happy about something but I also might be even happier if my father was happy about the same thing. The Praych DOUNG villagers shared their emotions that derived from their religious lives, and that affected their social viability as well.

From the point of symbolic anthropology, the interpretation of the dead grandmother's relatives and close friends of the situation was a powerful and meaningful one, yet merely arbitrary and culturally relative one. It stemmed from the cultural need of people to understand or have a causal knowledge about their lives. This was the only way they were pinned upon a cultural rendering of metaphysics. They "knew"¹⁸ their grandmother was fine.

¹⁸ The difference between knowing and believing, indeed, comes not from the individual but from the other in a social relationship. If there were only one person on earth, the difference between knowing and believing would be irrelevant. It is only from the other person's perspective that something might merely be belief instead of knowledge. Knowledge is always belief in the social arena, because there can always be other people who disagree with your knowledge.

However, from a socially inclined point of view, the cultural or religious symbolism here caused a sociological dilemma in which the family went from owning a large piece of land into owning hardly any land at all. At first, the family had mango trees, a small rice patch, a small vegetable garden, and a nice house along the street. However, due to a religious belief in a metaphysical ceremony, they had no extra land at all, merely a small plant to build a house on. Economically, they went from doing ok to doing nothing.

Thus, we have got a clear conflict between accomplishing something that Praych Doung villagers consider to be morally expected of them (as well as something that makes them feel upset if they do not do it) and what is economically or, to put it more clearly, developmentally expected from them – at least from the Western perspective. I mean this in all of those ideas in which positive socio-cultural change is associated with economic development. However, I will not deal with this issue more profoundly in here, as it belongs to the next chapter of “Morality and Socio-cultural change”.

Another important Khmer term is *kun*. In social context, the concept of *kun* has a strong relation to morality, *selethor*, because *kun* means something that people receive from kind acts, which is to say from morally accepted acts. It is a moral question from which act one can receive *kun* or which act is perceived as a good-hearted act. In Praych Doung village, this was most evident in the *kun* of one's parents, whom received lots of *kun* from raising their children, and afterwards the children had to *deung kun o-pouk m'day*, meaning that they had to know that their parents had been kind when they had raised their children. The idea of *sorng kun* was also important. Especially many younger adults in Praych Doung talked about returning their parents' *kun* back to their parents. In other words, the children had to be good to their parents because their parents had been good to them. *Kun* and *bon* are thus very similar concepts, and what I was told in Praych Doung the difference is mainly in closeness of relationship. Also, *kun* is a bit more Cambodian notion, as *bon* derives directly from Buddhism and is thus an Indian notion whereas *kun* is more used with regard to ancestor worship, paying tribute to one's dead relatives and in animistic festivities, such as dealings with *kru khmer* or *boramey*.

Kun is thus a religious concept that very straightforwardly contributes to social viability. When parents take care of their children and vice versa when children take care of their parents as they get old represents a social solution to a human problem of how to organize social viability. Social viability, no doubt, entails that children are socialized to become decent members

of the community and society. It also entails that the elderly are taken care of when they get too old to take care of themselves. Thus, one might argue that the notion of *kun* is a kind of Cambodian traditional social welfare system.

Indeed, what was very interesting to find in Praych DOUNG was that when *kun* is used in this way, it serves as a cohesive force that binds the community, the different lineages, and the different families together. It is a major force behind social viability. For instance, what makes a morally good family is defined through *kun*. In Praych DOUNG, it was very common for a parent to use a threat of violence in order to stop one's baby from crying, and beating one's children mildly was generally accepted. Despite of these facts, which in Western cultures could be deemed as child abuse and in some cases even domestic violence, the parents still got *kun* and thus were morally correct in their behaviour. And the children still had to take care of their parents when they grew old, and in doing so to return the *kun*. Fundamentally, if beating one's children does not reduce one's *kun*, beating one's children is a moral deed. I heard several times mothers complaining about their husbands because they did not beat their children often enough. I must argue, then, that the Praych DOUNG villagers thought of their children as objects – at least more so than in the Westernized world. But, what is of importance here is that when all of the Praych DOUNG villagers understood what this was about in the religious context of *kun* (too harsh on children as it may be), social viability was promoted and no one tried to intervene when a child was crying and trying to escape from a beating. A common understanding prevailed.

There is a kind of cultural consensus among the Praych DOUNG villagers that a soft violence from parents to children was morally justified when exercised in the fulfilment of a moral responsibility to protect and raise one's children. Indeed, few villagers even told me that a father who is afraid to beat his own son is a bad and careless father.

This was the structure of the social relations in Praych DOUNG, and this was the structure that managed social cohesion and social viability through morality. If a Western NGO-worker, for instance, would go to Praych DOUNG and educate the villagers on child welfare and child protection, there is little probability that the Praych DOUNG villagers would understand what that means. They might even think that the foreign way of raising children is fundamentally immoral.

The division in the field of anthropology between materialism and idealism is of interest here. It is the chicken-or-egg-dilemma of religious belief versus moralism: which came first, a religious view, say a need to treat one's daughter as someone who was born during the year

of the rabbit (here one can also see one of the most profound Chinese influences in Cambodia) because of inadequate health care in the society, or a moral view that was later framed as a religious view which later created a framework for a material rationale – in the above case, a need to understand one’s daughter’s health condition.

The most essential link between religion and morality in a Cambodian society is that religion is used as an authority to serve morality through legitimizing a material act in the world by framing it within a context of religion, whether it is regarding human health, eating, sleeping, and committing to social harmony and viability, and the like. Both materialistic and symbolic aspects of culture are in play here, as many religious views I found in Praych DOUNG were certainly derived from an environment in which it was difficult to survive (due to poverty, lack of health care, lack of education, tropical diseases, etc.), but at the same time hope was not given away in any instance and thus the means to survive were often given symbolic interpretations (meanings such as belief in a “*kru khmer*” really having a power to save a human being) – largely because there is always something that one has to believe in or, to put it perhaps more concretely, try out.

Action within a culture is driven both by the environment because that specific culture is shaped by the environment and by interpretations of that environment. It can be used as a tool in establishing oneself in the eyes of others (there was a woman in Praych DOUNG who felt strongly about participating and giving money in a “*bon*” that was organised for her long-gone grandmother in Vietnam). The social relations, that in Cambodia tend to be complex simply because Cambodians have lots of children and thus lots of sisters, brothers, cousins, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren, were of great importance in this pursuit. This can further be used in negotiating development of social relations and things like privateness and individual independence. How independent one should be? How should one establish oneself in the eyes of the others?

I have shown how moral guidelines can be culturally constructed from religious proclivities in the previous chapters. This is to say that they are constructed from people’s readiness to religiosity and their need to survive in their specific social and psychological realities, which are heavily influenced by religiosity and especially the opportunities magical beliefs can offer within those realities. I showed how these are manifested in Praych DOUNG village in Cambodia. The next part of this thesis is going to deal with the findings of this chapter and how they are related to socio-cultural change, which is an important part of development, through a kind of transition of different moral and social horizon’s that the future could hold.

I have argued here that the way in which religion affects social life in the Praych DOUNG village is through the moral context of defining the behavioral code. Religion is important

from a moral perspective in Praych Doung in that it yields social viability. I have argued that it is the single most important function of *sasna* in Praych Doung village in the context of social life.

4. Religious Context vs. Practical Everyday Context

4.1 Ontology & What Really Is?

In this chapter I ask the following question: How do the Praych DOUNG villagers that I met during my fieldwork believe in different religious or spiritual entities and the fact that certain people, such as the buddhist monks, the *achar*, the *thmuap*, and the *boramey*, have specific relations with them. Is it comparable with religious belief of, say, the US citizens for Christianity?

As it stands, there is no science to speak of in Praych DOUNG village. The education in Praych DOUNG village (a couple of people speaking very little english teaching children at their houses, and one public school with teachers being more often absent than present) is very basic, even bad in quality, and is not profound in any single subject. This is made worse by Khmer language, which does not have words for several modern scientific things, such as “cells” in biology or “derived function” in mathematics. Also, Khmer language lacks medical vocabulary and words for diseases. For instance, Cambodians call diabetes literally “disease water guide sweet”, which is rather undeveloped way of expressing it. Further, one would really find it impossible to translate words such as “hormone”, “beta cell”, “carbohydrate”, “fat metabolism”, or “anabolic” to Khmer language. One should explain those words to a Cambodian in a similar way one would explain them to a child. This is not to say that Cambodians are like children, but to say that their language is really undeveloped and not up to modern Western standards. It is a fact one should not ignore.

To analyze a bit further, I argue that it was the Ancient Greeks who created the ontological question of what really is, objectively (another word which, interestingly, does not exist in Khmer language), independent of human perception and belief. Our Western tradition comes from the Ancient Greeks, so it is definitely possible that Cambodians perceive the spirits from a completely different angle. They might not have the dilemma of what really is – objectively, independent of human perception.

For instance, let me show you how some ethnic tribal villagers in Cambodia who have converted to Christianity have said. These two quotes are taken from a newspaper called Phnom Penh Post.

(http://kohsantepheapdaily.com.kh/article/34802.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=koh+santepheap+daily, accessed 3.2.2012):

“We believe in Christianity because we are poor; we do not have money to buy buffaloes, chickens and pigs to pray for the spirits of the god of land or the god of water when those gods make us get sick,”

“When my family believed in Christianity, my old Buddha could not use the black magic on us anymore, because Jesus protected us,”

First of all, these comments show an idea that different religions and thus different deities exist at the same time in the same universe. The same is true for Praych Doung villagers. They do not perceive reality as being monotheistic, but instead give room for all of the religious ideas in the world. For them, Christianity and their own animism, for instance, are complementary.

Second of all, they show how the concept of religion for Cambodians in general is quite different from that of the Western world. What is especially evident in the second comment is the fact that when one converts from Buddhism to Christianity in Cambodia, or from any religion to another, for that matter, it does not mean that that particular person ceases to believe in the Buddha. That person merely states that, because she believes in Christianity, the still existing Buddha cannot hurt her anymore.

Thus, the Cambodian idea of religion is a kind of monolatry. Christianity, for instance, in Cambodia does not necessarily replace Buddhism but rather becomes an alternative for it. This is further implied in the way in Khmer language people usually say *kan sasna* (to carry a religion) instead of saying *jeua ler sasna* (to believe in religion). It would be very interesting to know whether that Cambodian person interviewed by the Phnom Penh Post really used the word believe or the more common phrase *kan sasna* in her comment, and whether the translation department interpreted it a bit incorrectly.

Nonetheless, this shows that Cambodians do not necessarily perceive the world, or reality, or ethos, in the same way than those who share the Greek tradition of philosophy and ontology. This shows the individual character of religion in Cambodia, as everyone can perceive religion and, for instance, the situation of Buddha and Jesus Christ existing at the same time, in their own right. When there is no notion of objectivity, the individual level of religion is more coherent and logical.

4.2 Religious Context In People's Everyday Lives

What I have established so far in this chapter is that the Praych DOUNG villagers do not experience the contradiction between a worldview derived from science and the Western philosophical/ontological tradition and a worldview derived from religious ideas. In Praych DOUNG village, one does not orient oneself towards religion or reality from a scientific perspective (which is often opposed to religion), like the heirs of the Western tradition. However, the question of how the Praych DOUNG villagers believe in their spirits remains. I shall discuss that question in the following through analysing Maurice Bloch's ideas regarding the difference of religious context and practical everyday context in his article "The Past and the Present in the Present" (1977).

I believe that to answer the question of "how Praych DOUNG villagers do believe in their spirits" one has to answer the question of "what is the relation between religious behaviour and practical everyday behaviour in Praych DOUNG". Or, in other words, what is the relation of religious context and practical everyday context within the lives of Praych DOUNG villagers?

In the aforementioned article, Maurice Bloch argues that cultural phenomena, such as notions of time, do not necessarily vary from culture to culture, but there are different contexts within people's lives where the cultural phenomena vary from one context to another. These contexts are manifestations of different cognitive systems that people inherently have. Bloch mainly talks about two contexts, the ritual context and the practical everyday context, resulting from two different cognitive systems which merely occasionally determine people's reality, as in switching places from time to time. In other words, people seem to have different, often contradictory, ideas about reality, ontology, of what really is, and this is by all means not seen as strange or impossible. Bloch writes:

"For example, Marilyn Strathern, in her study of ideas concerning women in the New Guinea Highlands (1972) shows how women are sometimes seen, for what they are, producers of food and children, while at other times as polluting creatures spoiling the creative activities of men." (1977: 289-290)

I have shown this to be the case in Praych DOUNG village as well in several respects. There are lots of beliefs and religious ideas in Praych DOUNG that would seem to be contradictory with everyday life reality. For instance, the pig farmers in Praych DOUNG village held several rituals for the protection of their pigs, and followed beliefs such as one cannot buy a new pig on a tuesday, but they also used pesticide on their pigsties. Another way to put this is that they follow or believe

both systems at the same time: the ritual system of not buying pigs on a tuesday and the practical system of using pesticide are used concurrently as if trying to be sure, as if trying to err on the good side rather than the bad one.

Further on, Bloch argues that Geertz emphasizes the ritual context in his article “Person, Time and Conduct in Bali” – in *The Interpretation of Culture* (Geertz, 1973) – too much, implying that it is so because the more exotic context of the two for a Western anthropologist, the ritual context, is more appealing and, indeed, more anthropological. In the aforementioned article, Geertz argues that the Balinese have a non-durational notion of time, meaning basically that the Balinese do not perceive the concept of time as linear, as going forward, as consisting of events taking place in a certain relation towards one another as in a line or in a queue.

However, Bloch argues that it is misleading to state that the Balinese have a non-durational notion of time, because, as he says, “*Sometimes and in some contexts they do, sometimes and in other contexts they do not, and those where they do not (agriculture, village and national politics, economics) cannot honestly be called unimportant*” (1977: 284).

Now, when it comes to the Praych DOUNG villagers, does this hold true as well? Do the Praych DOUNG villagers believe in spirits in merely some contexts and not in others, which would certainly diminish their meaning quite a bit, and at least change the nature of their belief?

My point is that, even though cultures and societies change and not everyone within any given social collective thinks the same and accepts the rules as they are, in Praych DOUNG village the role of *sasna* is important in a huge number of social contexts and that it should be emphasized in anthropological analysis of Cambodia in general. The examples of such contexts are health control, public safety, subsistence, and earning one’s living. For example, as I have shown above, several Praych DOUNG villagers think they have to make offerings to guardian spirits or other religious entities in order to be successful in one’s economic activities, such as raising pigs or repairing televisions and other electronics. The other side to this is, to some people, that it gives less incentive to focus on things like doing one’s work properly or trying to improve one’s activities in some way.

Indeed, I observed in Praych DOUNG village that several pig farmers use both pesticide and religious ritual in order to be successful. But none of the farmers I was in touch with had learned about raising pigs in any depth. For instance, none of them had purchased books to read about pig farming, and none of them told me they had had in-depth discussions with someone who already raises pigs so that they could share vital experience on pig farming. It’s almost as if to the Praych DOUNG pig farmers using pesticide was merely ritual. Of course they knew that pesticide kills harmful bacteria, but they only used it because everyone else used it as well. Why they didn’t elaborate on

this kind of activity is what makes me think of using pesticide as a ritual – as merely something that just has to be done.

So, the different contexts that Bloch proposed, the ritual context and the practical context, are not necessarily two different contexts at all in the Praych Doung perspective of things. Instead, there might be just one context in which these two contexts, seemingly different contexts from a Western or scientific perspective, have blended into a kind of cultural context for the Praych Doung villagers, so that they have the same orientation towards ritual and pesticide.

Think, for instance, that one would ask a Praych Doung pig farmer a question regarding the difference of the two contexts. Such question could be: *“Do you think that pesticide obviously, as a scientific and empirically indisputable fact, has real relevance in the real world, because it really kills bacteria and thus really helps in keeping pigs healthy, whereas offering rice wine to a guardian spirit is something different?”* What would they answer?

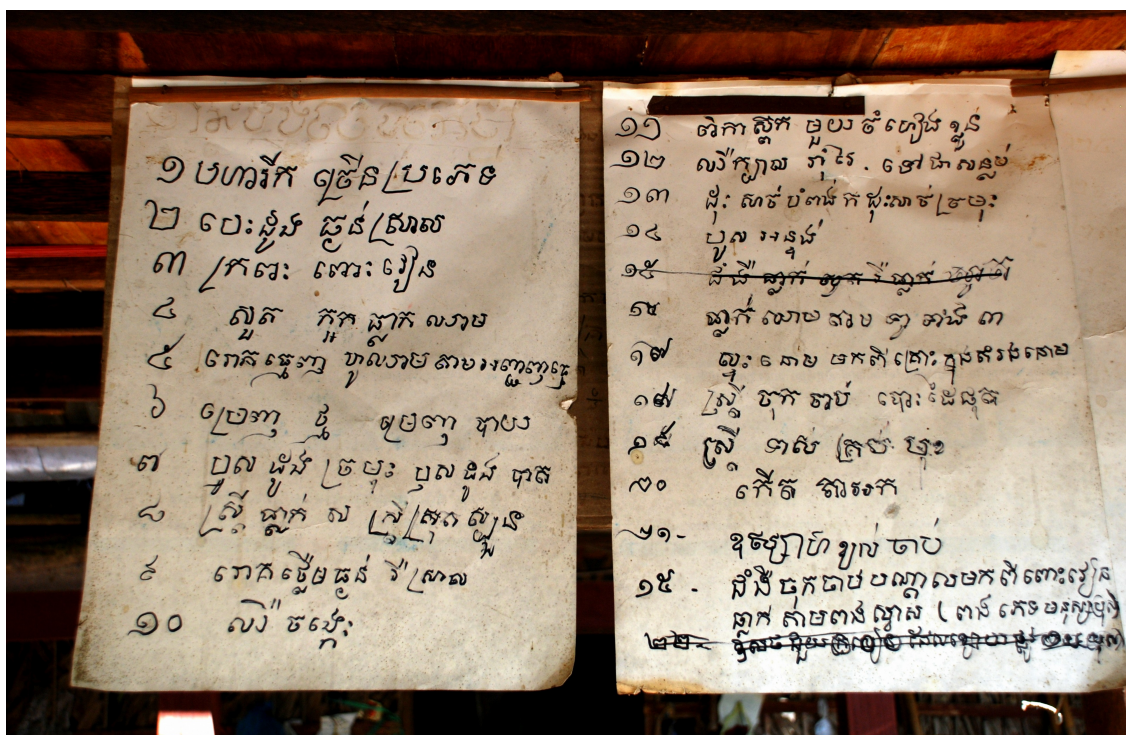
I am able to answer that question. They would say yes to the first part, but they would dispute the second part, that offering rice wine to a guardian spirit is something different. I know this because this is what most of the Praych Doung pig farmers told me when I asked them that question. They did not think that these are somehow two different contexts, one belonging to the ritual one and the other to the practical one, because, indeed, they did not have that kind of scientific concept of the difference.

In other words, the Praych Doung villagers did not have two different conceptualizations of the world in the sense that Bloch argued, because they don't feel that a scientific and a religious fact are somehow separate from each other. For the anthropologist, there are two conceptualizations, but for the Praych Doung villager, there are not. And this does not mean that the other is right and the other is wrong, because they are both right at the same time. The difference lies in perspective.

What I claim in this thesis is that, at least in Praych Doung village, these two different sets of conceptualizations do indeed exist if one perceives them, but because the local people (or a majority of them) do not perceive the “ritual” and the “practical” or “empirical” or “scientific” as belonging to different contexts, they behave as to the ritual and the practical are blended into one. Praych Doung villagers' ritual conceptions are so embedded in their every day conceptions that they do not necessarily see the difference between the two. Cultural aspects that appear for the Westerner as contradictory appear for the Praych Doung villager as complementary.

4.3 An Example of Health Care – The Placebo Effect

I have established that the different cognitive contexts do not appear similarly to the Praych Doung villagers than they appear to us Westerners. Now, consider one example of health care in Praych Doung village. The typical way in which the Praych Doung villagers treat the sick is to bring them to ritual healers such as the *kru khmer*, or to certain people who seem to know a lot about Khmer medicine. There was one such man in Praych Doung, who kept a traditional Khmer medicine shop at his house. He claimed to have medicine for every illness a man can get. While this is perhaps not credible from a Western scientific perspective, there is yet one illustrious thing to consider regarding the nexus between ritual context and practical everyday context.



A “menu” of traditional Khmer medicine at a medicine shop in Praych Doung village. The first one, for instance, is medicine for all kinds of cancer.

It is to think about the placebo effect of medicine and other (ritual) cures. The placebo effect conventionally means a positive effect on a patient’s health of such a medicine or cure that is not supposed to have any effect whatsoever from a Western medical perspective. For instance, someone could experience a relief of pain when given a pill which is alleged to be a painkiller but in reality is an ineffectual pill. The placebo effect has been recognized in the West, and it has been argued that people are psychological beings and that the brain is actually able to deceive itself into

sensing better health even in a situation in which somatically there would have been no effect and no change at all.

Now, from a Western medical perspective, the traditional Khmer medicine, such as medicine for cancer (see the picture above), is surely nothing but a placebo medicine. And so, even if it is not real cancer medicine, in that it does not really cure cancer, it may have the placebo effect on the Praych DOUNG villagers who do believe that the medicine is truly effectual (similar to the placebo patients in the West who believe they have gotten effectual medicine because they have been lied to). This would render the traditional Khmer medicine effectual as well. Maybe the medicine for cancer does not have any positive effects for too long, but medicine such as painkillers, medicine for flu, sore throat, cough, stomach ache, tiredness, and diarrhea, to name a few, might be a lot more effective as placebo medicine. And, of course, the traditional Khmer medicine might have real effects as well as they are manufactured out of roots, plants, and fruits that do have high concentration of vitamins, minerals, and other beneficial substances. But nonetheless I would argue the positive effect that they might have on people's health has a lot to do with the placebo effect.

According to Bloch, the Balinese have a non-durational notion of time in certain contexts, such as the ritual context that Clifford Geertz talked about, but not in others, such as the political context in which the Balinese view Sukarno and nationalism (1977: 283-284). In other words, to create a more general view, the main point by Bloch is that in any given community there are times when cultural trait "x" prevails and times when cultural trait "y" prevails. And, Bloch goes on to observe that it would be misleading for an anthropologist to say that either one of them was true while forgetting about the other – because both of them are true at the same time. The problem with Bloch is, however, that there is nothing wrong with forgetting one of them. There is nothing wrong with focusing on, say, the ritual contexts while forgetting the other contexts. While Bloch criticizes Geertz for being misleading in saying "that the Balinese have a non-durational notion of time" (1977: 284), it is not because it is not correct, but because it is not the whole truth. Bloch does not deny that the Balinese have a non-durational notion of time. He merely states that they have other notions of time as well. To me this comes rather close to a tautology – of course people have different ideas about the world in different moments and in different contexts.

When it comes to the Praych DOUNG village, it could be said that the Praych DOUNG villagers do sometimes believe in the traditional Khmer medicine, but that they also do sometimes believe in Western medicine which is also available. Even though they use Western medicine, it does not mean that they do not use their own traditional medicine as well. I believe the traditional Khmer medicine with the placebo effect is a rather interesting example of a belief in medicine,

because it is used as in ritual in the sense that it carries a symbolic cure (and placebo) rather than a medically proved one. It is thus an example of the “ritual context” that nonetheless is important for the Praych DOUNG villagers in the sense that they do seriously try to use it in curing illnesses and in treating one’s health.

The same holds for small-scale entrepreneurs in Phnom Penh. If one travels to the capital of Cambodia, one can easily observe several small shops, cafés, and restaurants that people run at their houses. One can also often see the owners of these businesses coming out and conducting the *sroich teuk* ritual, in which they sprinkle “holy water” around the premises and, for instance, onto the products that are sold at the shop. In restaurants, the water may be sprinkled on the chairs and the tables. The ritual is believed to bring good luck for the business, meaning more customers and more money. The shops and cafés run by local Phnom Penhers are often very similar to each other, and rather rudimentary in nature. And they all seem to trust on the *sroich teuk* ritual rather than on designing a different style (different kind of food in a restaurant, for instance), having clearance sales, or trying to find other ways of attracting customers. This is yet one more example in which the ritual context comes to the fore in people’s lives in Cambodia, prevailing over what might be considered an economic context in the West. It shows the importance of the ritual context in Cambodia.

I argue that such heavy reliance on a religious belief, that the *sroich teuk* ritual actually brings more customers to the shop or to the restaurant, promotes lack of creativity and lack of entrepreneurship in Phnom Penh in particular, but also in Cambodia in general. The same goes for the Praych DOUNG village as well, although it is more difficult to observe as there are not so many cafés and shops there. But the cultural substance is the same: a religious belief promotes lack of creativity and lack of economic perseverance, creating bad economic success, poverty, and dominance of the elite. In other words, the religious context prevails over other contexts in a matter that is of great importance: people trying to gain a livelihood.

Let us turn to a happening that was quite overwhelming in Cambodia and that occurred on the last day of Pchum Ben, the day of the dead, on 15th of October in 2012. The King Father, *samdeich tar*, (lit. the royal grandfather) colloquially known as Norodom Sihanouk, died in Beijing while being treated there to a series of diseases and old-age problems (he also had a fancy residence there). Among Cambodians, he was a great man. Well, not a great man per se, but a great image. He was an image of a great man, an invented cultural image.

He died less than a month shy from his 80th birthday, and as he passed, a great religious wave passed through the whole kingdom. Thousands of people travelled from the provinces to the capital in order to pay homage to the former king, a father of the nation, at the Royal Palace of the Kingdom of Cambodia, and thousands of monks came to pray and chant in order to revere the king. Even though this happened after my fieldwork, I got my hands on ethnographic data regarding this incident through a Skype discussion with my “key informant” who witnessed the scene in Phnom Penh. As it turns out, there was a phenomenon in which several people saw the King Father’s face in the moon. As the information about this spread across the country, thousands of people rushed outside to see Sihanouk’s face in the moon. My informant told me that she met dozens of people who claimed to have seen a clear image of Sihanouk’s face in the moon. All of them seemed to be very happy and glorious about having seen the face in the moon, and they were apparently proclaiming the news in a rather vivid fashion. My informant even discussed with an older lady who had seen the face, and that particular person was very happy and said that if one does not see the face, one does not have *ni-sai* with the former King, meaning vaguely that one does not get along very well with the king.

However, what is interesting about this phenomenon was that it was widespread across the whole country and there were lots of people who claimed to see clearly the King Father’s face in the moon. There are mainly two reasons for the widespread nature of this phenomenon. Firstly, the idea of Sihanouk’s face in the moon came from other people, because no one saw Sihanouk’s face anywhere else. This has to do with the cultural horizon of expectations, which is bounded to humanly known things, such as the circulation of ideas from people to people (the importance of Greg Urban’s (1996) “*circulation of discourse*”). The superhuman realm is never able to transcend the human realm. And like Urban argued, what most often and most vigorously is circulating among people is exactly the things that cannot be easily verified, that is, declared false or true (Urban 1996). Secondly, the fact that there are other people, and like the case of Sihanouk’s face in the moon suggests, lots of other people, who see the same thing adds to the objectivity of the phenomenon and in turn is likely to spur some more “cases”, that is, people who see the same thing. So it is a kind of snowball effect.

Some people jump on the band-wagon, and some people really believe to be seeing a face in the moon, which is a psychological proclivity. During the social media era, there were lots of pictures of Sihanouk’s face in the moon on Facebook, and that is an efficient factor in the circulation of that idea. But at the end of the day, no one saw Sihanouk’s face anywhere else, and no one saw anything else in the moon (at least so that it came to anyone’s attention). In a way, it would have culturally been impossible, because culture pretty much is a circulation of discourse. When

something becomes circulating, it becomes culture, and when it becomes culture, it starts denying other possible forms of culture, circulation, and empirical fact. It would have been as impossible as it would have been for Jesus two thousand years ago to really make a miracle and pull out a Nokia mobile phone out of his pocket, call to the president of the United States of America, and foresee the problem of Israel as we perceive it today. The horizon of expectations and creativity, which is limited according to cultural and historical rules and perspectives, renders anything acultural impossible.

In Praych DOUNG village, people experienced images of the late king father on the moon as well. As long as people experience strong sense of happiness and togetherness and meaningfulness in such a religious or supernatural cultural phenomenon, it draws people's attention away from certain kind of socio-cultural matters that might be prioritized in other places. Praych DOUNG villagers are able to apply for a national ID-card, for instance, once a year (approximately, there are no strict timetables), but as long as they are happy with such religious phenomena they are not that eager to wish for a change in the ID-card application policy (something that might be a lot more important for many Western people). I would argue that the Praych DOUNG villagers' religious proclivities, such as the aforementioned phenomenon, renders other kind of proclivities or, indeed, contexts (political, socio-economic, sociological, and so forth) less urgent. With this example in mind, I would argue that the religious context is overwhelming for so many people because it is the only context that is able to profoundly touch people's feelings, as in Cambodians getting happy from seeing their King Father's face in the moon. People need to be emotionally in balance, and the ritual or religious belief often creates such balance. This is one of the reasons why the ritual context exists.

To conclude this chapter, I argue that the ritual context and the practical everyday context are not similarly perceived as different (or contradictory) scientific and abstract categories for the Praych DOUNG villagers as they might be for a Western scientist. Also, the ritual context in Praych DOUNG village is resorted to with regard to several important aspects of life, such as people's health and curing illnesses, or making a livelihood. Bloch's point that there are different contexts within which people act, believe, and comprehend the world is a true one, but irrelevant. What is relevant is that the ritual context is also there, for some people stronger than for others, but nonetheless it is there. And, I have shown in this chapter that the ritual context is indeed of great importance for the Praych DOUNG villagers in particular, and for Cambodians in general.

5. Conclusion

I find that anthropology's main interest is, indeed, must be, human experience. Questions such as why these people fish using this particular method, how on earth different kinds of religions can still continue to exist throughout the world, or how an individual can or cannot relate to his/her cultural environment are questions worth asking for. Further, these questions should be asked in a context of human feelings and human contradictions. Thus, the so-called "cultural studies", which have been brushed aside in anthropology quite a long time ago (not so much because of cultural studies being invalid or too stereotypical but because of the current trends in anthropology which are negative towards cultural studies), are not the most plausible methodology through which to answer these questions. In this thesis, accordingly, I have not sought to universalize all of the Praych DOUNG villagers as "Buddhist", as "Theravada Buddhists", or as adherents of any other single religion or cosmological order either.

Instead, I have analysed *sasna* in Praych DOUNG village, which is the religion in Praych DOUNG village as perceived by the Praych DOUNG villagers. And, as perceived by the Praych DOUNG villagers, it is a mixture of different religious abstract categories that the anthropologist calls buddhism, brahmanism, or animism. It also varies from individual to individual, and from time to time. I studied *sasna* in a local context of the Praych DOUNG village where I conducted my fieldwork for this thesis.

I have shown how different religious values and cultural phenomena influence both people's individual feelings towards their everyday lives and collectively the whole of the Praych DOUNG village (in the sense that they are trying to solve their everyday problems with each other and towards each other so that they can experience social viability through sharing the same moral settings and understand each others' behaviour). It is the tendency of the Praych DOUNG villagers to believe in supernatural things, spirits, and religious rituals and ceremonies, and through these to satisfy their need for causal explanation and, more to the point, to either survive in the world or to create an illusion of survival in the world (depending on whether a given religious ritual or belief in *sasna* truly has an effect on one's material well-being and concrete everyday problems or not).

Everybody has the capacity to act religiously, because everybody needs causal explanation to guide their lives and actions, and religion, just like science in many Western parts of the world (and modernized parts of the third world as well), serves to provide a framework in which causal explanation can be organised and put into action concretely. For the people I studied in Praych DOUNG village, religion (or more precisely religious or supernatural ideas and beliefs that

were a mixture of Buddhism and locally construed animistic nuances), or *sasna*, was the single most plausible framework for causal explanation due to poverty, lack of education, illiteracy, and a common way of transmitting and translating information through oral tradition. The Praych DOUNG villagers' use of *sasna* was in reference to dealing with personal issues and tragedy that was inevitable in their lives. The tragedy has been inevitable due to long years of civil war, social misery, and poverty that Cambodia has experienced in its most recent history. The Praych DOUNG villagers use of *sasna* is obvious, because action defines human life. Passivity and doing nothing would be the antonym of life – and the synonym of death. And in being active people need both common rules and common values for the social viability of the group, so that cultural meanings could exist within that group.

It might just be that the need for causal explanation (correct causality or not) lies at the heart of most human cultures. The educated people of the world, who have went from primary schools and secondary schools to high schools and universities, have an understanding of the world much through their education, in laws of physics and in complexities of economics. The most normal speech act of an educated person is an offering of a causality: it might rain tomorrow because the weatherman said so, the weatherman said so because he has a highly sophisticated way of predicting rain, and it is conventionally “known” that raindrops fall rather than rise due to earth's gravity. These are all causal statements and explanations, something that have a cause and effect.

The uneducated Praych DOUNG villager had never heard of gravity, and had rarely a weather forecast in the television. The wife of my landlord, for instance, a woman and a mother in her thirties, reckoned that the heavy rains that washed Praych DOUNG village in the middle of May in 2012, right after the Khmer New Year in April which saw the beginning of the dragon's year, were due to a fact (causal explanation) that it always rains heavily during the dragon's year. In effect, the two different understandings of the educated and the uneducated were perhaps very different, the other being more correct and plausible than the other (perhaps), but the same mental process and a cultural habit of understanding and explaining causally was at place. The Praych DOUNG villagers, a lot like me as well, had lots of opinions or thoughts or arguments or ponderings on causality – that is, on something causing something else. The cognitive framework was the same. The logic through which the framework was put into effect was different. In both cases, the people were confident about their ideas and about themselves. They both had fulfilled their need to causally understand the world in order to control one's own life in it.

This is what binds religion to people's everyday lives, very much like science is bound to many Westerners' lives. And it is the most important function of *sasna* for Praych DOUNG

villagers to serve as the context within which the Praych DOUNG villagers define and legitimize their everyday lives and their problem-solving pursuits and, simply put, their survivalism.

Religion, or *sasna*, in Praych DOUNG village is more of an individual thing rather than a social cohesive thing. Of course it is clear that *sasna* becomes social in that it is shared and circulated throughout the village (and wider Cambodia) as a cultural phenomenon. It is shared because the individual need for religion is so universal. Everyone in Praych DOUNG village, like everyone else in the world as well, have a need for causal explanation, and religion is but one conceptualization which gives answers and solution to every day life problems. When it fails as a solution, it is able to offer hope and piece of mind instead. The need for causal explanation is similar to the need for nourishment; whereas one culture offers a certain set of norms and values regarding food and what is edible and what is not, another culture has a completely different idea of the same question. And, shared culture tends to solve these problems (regarding either nourishment or causal explanation) that individual's have separately from one another – what is shared is not the problem per se but the solution. And, people are destined to embrace solutions that they were born with in a given culture.

Sasna is also relevant within the context of Praych DOUNG villagers' feelings and emotions. Religious ritual gives the Praych DOUNG villagers hope and control, even though the control might be ostensible, just like scientific approach to food security tells many Westerners what is healthy food and what is not. Westerners often use scientific research in arguing in either favour or against something, such as what kind of diet is a healthy diet. It is in the same way that the Praych DOUNG villagers give arguments in either favour or against things based on religion.

People also need confirmation and acceptance for their actions and beliefs, such as confirmation that the problem they are trying to solve could indeed be solved with one's current method. If there is an authority that says one will be more successful in raising pigs with offering fruit and rice wine to spirits than without, then it is likely that one will be happy with that.

The Praych DOUNG villagers have a need for causal explanation, just like every other people have as well, meaning that when something happens in their life, such as a child gets severely sick, or a week-year-old infant dies, they always have an causal explanation for it. They always seem to know what has caused the sickness; the sickness being the effect and the explanation being the cause in causality. For the Praych DOUNG villagers, the cause for an infant's fatal sickness lies usually in *sasna*. The most usual example would be explaining a fatal sickness of a week-year-old infant with a religious belief that the infant's "original mother", *m'day daem*, has demanded her child back to its previous existence. It is clear that, as the Praych DOUNG villagers do

not enjoy the luxury of modern medicine and medical expertise, they do not know of the real cause for the infant's death and thus have to explain it through a religious belief, or *sasna*.

One might question this "need" for causal explanation by arguing that it might merely be a learned habit of explaining a week-old-infant's death in a way in which one's parents and ancestors had also explained such deaths for decades and centuries. But as I have shown in this thesis, the psychological ramifications on the individual level of religious experience are profound and overwhelming, and it is very observable in Praych DOUNG village that the religious beliefs they hold ease their pain, give them hope, and give them self-confidence. The need for causal explanation stems from people being psychological beings: a mother who loses her long-awaited baby after just one week of togetherness undoubtedly feels a lot better if she can explain the loss so that she could do something about it later in her life, for example when she's pregnant again and wants to be sure that this time everything will be alright (which would be done through a ritual of propitiating the *m'day daem* by offering her whatever a religious authority, such as a *kru khmer*, deems the *m'day daem* to be craving for).

The single most important social function of *sasna* in Praych DOUNG village is that it affects social life through the moral context of defining the behavioral code in the village through supramorals, such as what is acceptable and what is respectable kind of behaviour in the religious context. For instance, one can gain a good reputation in Praych DOUNG village by donating a little money to building or conserving a Buddhist monastery, which in turn can open up new social relations. Also, if people understand each other through *sasna*, in the sense that they understand what other people are doing when they are committing to different religious acts, they have more social viability because people who understand each other also get more easily along with each other. There is no religious antagonism stemming from different factions of religious beliefs and understanding, which could potentially create animosities about how to lead a proper life, for instance about how to organize a funeral or how to properly wed two people with each other. I have argued that it is the single most important function of *sasna* in Praych DOUNG village in the context of social life.

In chapter 4 I discussed Maurice Bloch's analytical division of different contexts of people's lives into the ritual context and the everyday context respectively. According to Bloch, these different contexts stem from different sets of conceptualization that people have, meaning simply that people perceive things differently in different situations. Bloch stated that whenever an anthropologist argues that people "x" have a cultural trait "y", such as when Clifford Geertz argued that the Balinese have a non-durational notion of time, it is not the whole truth as it is only so in a certain context, such as in the ritual context in the case of Geertz, but not in the practical everyday

context. Thus, according to Bloch, it would be wrong to state that the Balinese are very religious (and culturally peculiar from a Western perspective) people who have a non-durational notion of time, which differs greatly from the durational notion of time in the West. It is because they only have the non-durational notion of time in the ritual context, meaning they perceive time as such when conducting rituals, but in growing rice they have a different notion of time – a notion of time which is not so exotic and culturally peculiar. Bloch further argued that it is the exotic nature of the ritual context that makes the Western anthropologist to emphasize it over the humdrum everyday context.

What I claim in chapter 4 is that, at least in Praych Doung village, these two different sets of conceptualization do indeed exist if one perceives them, but because the local people (or a majority of them) do not perceive the “ritual” and the “practical” or “empirical” or “scientific” as belonging to different contexts, they behave as to the ritual and the practical are blended into one. Praych Doung villagers’ ritual conceptions are so embedded in their every day conceptions that they do not necessarily see the difference between the two. Cultural aspects that appear for the Westerner as contradictory appear for the Praych Doung villager as complementary. I also showed that the Praych Doung villagers do heavily resort to the ritual context in several areas of life, such as health care, healing sicknesses, and striving for good results in pig breeding or shop-keeping. When it comes to the Praych Doung villagers, at least for the time being, it would be more correct to say that they are religious people who comprehend their lives within the ritual context through the ideas of *sasna*.

Appendix of Khmer Words

<i>achar</i>	laity ritual leaders
<i>ak-phi-voat</i>	development (see page 16)
<i>baab</i>	the opposite of merit (a bad deed; something that is bad)
<i>barang</i>	French (used colloquially in reference to any foreigner with white skin)
<i>bon</i>	merit
<i>boramey</i>	a kind of Cambodian spirit
<i>deung kun o-pouk m'day</i>	lit. to know one's parents <i>kun</i> , to be aware that one's parents are good
<i>joal bon</i>	to attend a merit-making, to make merit
<i>jom-neang</i>	spirit house
<i>jom-peak</i>	to get something for credit
<i>kaal bpe-mun</i>	before; in the earlier days; in the past
<i>ka thwer bon</i>	merit-making
<i>kong-mar</i>	spirit house (different from <i>jom-neang</i>)
<i>kun</i>	a kind of measure of goodness, one gets <i>kun</i> from doing good
<i>kru khmer</i>	a kind of Cambodian sorcerer
<i>kru tiey</i>	a fortune-teller
<i>lok tar</i>	a variety of spirit, usually a guardian of a house or a village
<i>luy sakun</i>	money given out of gratitude
<i>majah teuk dey</i>	owner of the land
<i>m'day daem</i>	one's (original) mother from one's previous life
<i>nisai</i>	good relation
<i>pchum ben</i>	a 15-day Buddhist festival or "ancestors' day"
<i>pra-leung</i>	spirits of people (every human being has several of these)
<i>pra-payney</i>	tradition
<i>riic jom-raan</i>	development (see page 16)
<i>sallathor</i>	morality
<i>samdeich tar</i>	lit. "the royal grandfather", the late Norodom Sihanouk
<i>sasna</i>	religion
<i>sasna preah pout</i>	Buddhism
<i>sasna preah yesu</i>	Christianity
<i>sok-jii-wea-thor</i>	morality
<i>sorng kun</i>	to repay one's debt to one's parents
<i>sorng vinj pel kraoy</i>	to pay for or return something later
<i>speun chruy chongvar</i> ..	Chruy Chongvar bridge, or more commonly the "Japanese Bridge"
<i>sroich teuk</i>	a ritual in which a Buddhist monk washes a person with "holy water"
<i>teuk dey</i>	land (lit. water & land)
<i>thwer bon</i>	to make merit
<i>thwer kar pe-ye khloen</i>	to conduct precautionary measures
<i>thmuap</i>	shamans, whom act in between the concrete and the spirit worlds
<i>thngai sal</i>	holy day
<i>tumneam tumloab</i>	custom, habit
<i>vithi bon</i>	Buddhist ceremony
<i>wat</i>	Buddhist monastery

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Synopsis of the Thesis

In this thesis, I take a close look at *sasna*, or religion, in the Praych Doung village at Kandal Province of Central Cambodia. More specifically, I analyze the religious behaviour and religious rituals of Praych Doung villagers who were ethnic Khmers, both men and women, with rather poor and uneducated backgrounds aged approximately from 25 to 45 years. I conducted a six-month-long field trip at Praych Doung village for this purpose.

My aim is to illustrate what their religious behaviour is in practice, and to answer the question of why they do need/have religion, religious behaviour, and religious ritual, to name a few. I also examine the nature of belief for the Praych Doung villagers, as I seek to understand how and in what ways they believe in spirits and in other religious or supernatural forces and entities. For instance, I seek answers to the question of can the Praych Doung villagers' belief in spirits be compared to belief in god in Western societies? The focus, then, is rather general, perhaps, but my point is to narrow the focus on one village at rural Cambodia and to report as well as I can about *sasna* and its intricacies there. The "target people" of this study thus serves as the specific (or narrow) aspect of the focus, and I try to analyse the whole of religiosity of that people from their own perspective, which is to say from the local perspective, as I witnessed and experienced it.

In Chapter 2, I pay attention to psychological functionalism of religion along the lines of both Bronislaw Malinowski (1925) and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1979), who talked about religion providing for psychological needs and religion serving as an explanatory framework for workings of nature respectively. I will relate to these theories in Chapter 2 in analysing the Praych Doung villagers through a notion of "causal explanation" of religion.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the social functions of religion in the Praych Doung village, mostly focusing on moral matters, as I argue it is a shared morality and shared comprehension of religion that sustains the Praych Doung villagers' social life and that creates social viability. I focus on this through Joel Kupperman's analytical division of religious ethics into religious morals and religious supramorals. According to Kupperman, religious morals are moral codes and norms that incite feelings of guilt when transgressed (examples being not to kill or not to steal), while the religious supramorals incite feelings of regret or inadequacy (examples being not to neglect the elderly or not to withdraw from joining shared rituals). If religion sustains any kind of social viability, it is sustained within the realm of religious supramorals and not within the realm of religious morals, because it is within the realm of religious supramorals that the Praych Doung community is more fragile and suspect to change. It is not expected that the Praych Doung villagers would suddenly start killing each other (which would obviously alter the social equilibrium), but it

is highly possible that the young start neglecting the elderly (because of a difference in their religious preoccupations) or the economically successful get less interested in the economically unsuccessful when it comes to shared rituals.

I analyze the individual aspects first and the social aspects after in a bid to point out that, at least in Praych Doung village for the villagers I interviewed and encountered, religious life fundamentally reflects individual matters, problems, and life crises, and that the social functions of religion are an extension of these individual matters as they relate to other people's individual matters in the moral context. Social cohesion is most fundamentally a balance of individuals' relations and a shared understanding of each others' – both religious and unreligious – actions.

In Chapter 4, the last chapter, I analyze Maurice Bloch's ideas on different contexts within people's lives in which they act and orient themselves in different ways according to different meanings and conceptions that are embedded in the different contexts. I do this in the last chapter because, in my opinion, it serves as a decent background for everything discussed in earlier chapters. Are the ideas and arguments made in earlier chapters merely plausible in the religious context but not in the practical every day context? If it was so, it would surely change the meaning of the whole thesis, as it would render *sasna* less significant for the Praych Doung villagers. Is *sasna* merely a habitual ritual which is forgotten when the morning comes, the roosters crow, and one heads to the rice fields? Or is *sasna* somehow brought to the rice fields as well, making it an all-encompassing set of ideas for the Praych Doung villagers, affecting every aspect of Praych Doung humanity?

Bloch namely discusses two important contexts, the religious context and the practical every day context, arguing that people might perceive the world in different ways within the different contexts. He further argues that an anthropologist would be mistaken to argue that a certain perspective in any given cultural group that the anthropologist observes is the culturally-specific perspective of that given group, because that perspective might merely belong to one context but not to another. For instance, it could be true that the Praych Doung villagers believe in spirits in the religious context but at the same time know that there are no spirits within the practical everyday context. If it were so it would be reductionism to state that the Praych Doung villagers believe in spirits. In Chapter 4, I argue that the Praych Doung villagers do not have such abstract and analytical divisions of reality or perception into different conceptual contexts, and that *sasna* thus permeates the whole of the Praych Doung ethos.

One of the main findings of the thesis, then, is the fact that the Praych Doung villagers are deeply invested in *sasna* on the individual level, with *sasna* providing explanation for several life-crisis events and individual problems that the Praych Doung villagers experience in their lives.

On the social level, religion offers them merely a kind of understanding on moral terms that other people are invested in religious matters, which sustains the community in the sense that there are no contradictory social ideas or understandings that could create animosities. The Praych Doung villagers are living in rather poor and uneducated conditions, which means their lives are not easy and comfortable and thus they have a need of causal explanation for the problems that they face in their every day lives. This is simply because they need to believe to be in control of their own lives, so that they could at least try to engage in protective measures when it comes to such things as diseases or misfortune. This gives the Praych Doung villagers feelings of hope and consolation.

Also, the Prayh Doung villagers have never been familiar with Western kind of philosophical matters such as ontology and the nature of spirits (which they believe in). They do not have the same kind of analytical and abstract division of their lives into different categories, or contexts, than what Maurice Bloch suggested in the case of Indonesians. The question for the Praych Doung villagers is not so much about whether or not the spirits exist, or in which contexts. The spirits for them are more like a conceptual methodology of how they perceive themselves living in the world and controlling their own lives in it. Thus the spirits, for the Praych Doung villagers, do not either exist or not exist but, instead, they are either used or not used as conceptual tools.